STAR OF INDIA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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STAR OF INDIA

BY

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DEDICATED TO MY COUSIN,

BEATRICE MARY BYNG HOLDEN

STAR OF INDIA

PART I

CHAPTER I

I dare not choose my lot;
I would not if I might.
Choose thou for me, my God,
So shall I walk aright.

THE rustic portion of the congregation shouted the familiar hymn with laborious goodwill, overpowering the more cultivated voices that rose from the chancel and the front pews—almost defeating the harsh notes wrung from the harmonium by the village schoolmistress, who also led the singing in a piercing key, supported raucously by her pupils gathered about the unmusical instrument. Even in the early 'nineties nothing so ambitious as an organ or a surpliced choir had as yet been attempted in this remote west-country parish, though with the advent of the new vicar innovations had begun; actually, of late, the high oak pews had been removed to make way for shining pitch-pine seats that in the little Norman church produced much the same effect as a garish oleograph set in an antique frame. Most of the parishioners approved the change; certainly it had the advantage of permitting everyone to observe

at leisure who came to church, what they wore, and how they behaved during the sermon, even if those who were somnolently inclined found the publicity disconcerting.

Stella Carrington, for one, infinitely preferred the new seats. Though no longer a child—seventeen last birthday—she could never quite forget the hours of misery she had endured in the old pew; the smell of dust and hassocks, the feeling of captivity, the desperate impulse that would assail her to kick open the door, to fling a prayer-book over the barrier, to jump up on the seat; only the fear of grandmamma's wrath had restrained her from such antics. This Sunday, as she stood between Aunt Augusta and Aunt Ellen, singing the hymn that preceded the sermon, recollections returned to her of her childhood's trials in the high pew, and with these, unaccountably, came the old sense of imprisonment. The feeling disturbed her; she searched her mind for the cause, and became conscious that it was somehow connected with the presence of Maud Verrall, seated with her parents in the religious preserve of the Squire and his family in the chancel. The Verralls had been absent from The Court for a considerable period, and now here was Maud, who when Stella last saw her had been in short petticoats with her hair down her back, transformed into a young lady; she had a curled fringe, bangles and puffed sleeves; her dress touched the ground, she had a waist, and her hat, of a fashionable sailor shape, was set well to the back of her head. And all this though she was no older than her former playmate,

Stella Carrington, whose skirts even now barely reached her ankles, whose hair still hung in a plait, whose hat, in her own opinion, was more suited to a child in a perambulator than to a girl of seventeen. No wonder she felt stifled, cramped! She realised why the memory of her tortures in the old box-like pew had recurred to her mind; and then suddenly the hymn that she knew so well and had sung on such countless Sundays, paying no special heed to the words, struck her as the acme of hypocrisy. She ceased singing, amazed that the recognition had not come to her sooner. Surely whoever was responsible for the wording of this hymn could never have known the tedium for a young person of living with a stony-hearted grandmother and two maiden aunts in a small village where nothing ever happened; the author must have belonged to people like the Verralls, who were, of course, satisfied with their "lot," and did not want to change it; people who could "dare" do anything they pleased. If she, Stella Carrington, could choose her lot at this moment, she would change places with Maud Verrall; and she wondered how Maud would feel if she found herself forced to accept the lot of Stella Carrington! Would Maud still humbly proclaim that she would not change it even if she might? . . .

Only when Aunt Augusta, regarding her severely, touched her arm did Stella discover that the hymn was ended; that the congregation was settling down for the sermon. She sank to her seat, blushing, abashed.

Summer had set in early that year, and the sun

poured through the stained glass window subscribed for by the parish to a former Squire Verrall, casting kaleidoscopic patterns of purple and crimson on to grandmamma's brown silk bonnet; a premature bumble-bee droned and bumped up and down the panes, the atmosphere felt airless, and Aunt Ellen sniffed elegantly at her green salts-bottle. Stella grew drowsy; she could not attend to the sermon, and her thoughts strayed on in confusion. . . . Would Canon Grass, the vicar, dare to change his lot if he might? Perhaps he would like to change Mrs. Grass, who was older than himself, for the pretty visitor who was one of The Court party in the chancel pew. . . . And how about Mrs. Daw, who was so artistic, and considered her talents wasted in her position as wife to a country doctor; who complained that no one in the village really understood or appreciated "Art". . . . How much happier Mrs. Daw would be in London had she the opportunity of changing her lot—of converting her husband into a West End physician. And as to the villagers; everyone knew that they were never contented, no matter what was done for them. At this point in her reflections Stella fell asleep.

The service over, she followed grandmamma and the aunts slowly down the aisle, while the school children clattered through the porch. The Court party left the building by the chancel door, and Stella saw them pace down the slope of the churchyard between the tombstones and the yew trees to where a carriage and pair of horses awaited them at the gates. Squire Verrall went first, in a black coat and

a square hat like a box, his whiskers were brushed smartly aside from his ruddy cheeks, his large nose shone in the sun, he waved his malacca cane to the school children marshalled on either side of the pathway; Mrs. Verrall followed, delicate, smiling, sweet, in dark green satin, and a white ostrich feather floating from a boat-shaped hat; with her came the pretty visitor, who walked with a Grecian bend . . . and Maud. Stella observed that Maud was "showing off"; that she minced and looked down her nose as she passed between the rows of bobbing, saluting children and villagers. Stella was filled with an envious contempt for such conceit; such airs and graces! Three maid-servants completed the procession; even they would drive back to The Court, on the rumble of the big carriage, while Stella Carrington would walk through the lanes to The Chestnuts pulling her grandmother's chair, Aunt Augusta pushing behind, Aunt Ellen shielding the old lady with a green-lined umbrella. They would wait on themselves at luncheon; probably there would be boiled mutton and a milk pudding. . . .

There was: in her present rebellious mood, the sight of the plain, wholesome food was to Stella as the proverbial last straw. Aunt Augusta carved the mutton; a watery red stream issued from the joint, mingling with the caper sauce that surrounded it.

"None for me, thank you," said Stella, with suppressed fury.

"My dear, why not?" It was grandmamma who made the inquiry, and Stella thought the old lady looked like a sea-gull, seated at the end of the table

in her close white cap, her snowy hair looped on either side of her curved nose.

"I hate boiled mutton!" Beneath her rising defiance the girl was conscious of amazement at her own temerity. She pushed back her chair and stood up, quivering—a slim young beauty, giving promise of fine development, though neither beauty nor promise had as yet been recognised by herself or by her guardians.

"Yes, I do hate it!" she cried, and her eyes, the colour of burnt sienna, filled with rebellious tears, "and I hate milk puddings and babyish clothes, and getting up in the morning and going to bed at night with nothing in between—the same every day. How you could all stand up and sing that hymn, *'I dare not choose my lot,'* " she mocked, *" 'I would not if I might,'* as if you meant it! Why, for most of us, it was simply a lie!"

For a space there was a shocked silence. Augusta, the carving knife poised in her hand, looked at her mother; Ellen stared at her plate and extracted her salts-bottle with stealth from her pocket; Stella found her own gaze drawn helplessly to the expressionless old countenance at the end of the table, and, despite her new-born courage, she quailed.

"My dear," said grandmamma smoothly, "you had better go and lie down. The weather has upset you. I think you require a powder."

Stella burst into something between laughter and tears; she made a childish dash for the door and ran noisily up the stairs.

The meal in the dining-room continued as though

nothing had happened. It was not a Carrington custom to discuss unpleasant occurrences at meals, or, indeed, at any other time, if such discussions could possibly be avoided; the Carrington elders possessed a fine faculty for ignoring difficult subjects. It was a gift that had carried them apparently unscathed through various trials. When it became imperative to speak of anything painful it was done as briefly and reservedly as possible. It was not until well on in the afternoon, when Mrs. Carrington had awakened from her nap in the drawing-room, that Stella's outrageous behaviour was mentioned.

The drawing-room at The Chestnuts was a long narrow room with three French windows opening on a little paved terrace. Formerly the house had been a farm dwelling, the last remnant of a property acquired a century ago by a Carrington ancestor with a fortune made in the East and dissipated in the West. The Court, where the Verralls now reigned, had once belonged to this magnificent Carrington, and the ladies of The Chestnuts never forgot the fact. They regarded the Verralls as interlopers, though by now the Verralls had been lords of the manor for several generations.

But though The Court and all its acres were lost to the Carringtons, they had clung as a family to Chestnut Farm, adding to it from time to time as fluctuating fortunes permitted. It was a haven for Carrington widows, unmarried daughters, retired old-soldier Carringtons; a jumping-off place for sons as they started in life, a holiday home for successions of young Carringtons while their parents were abroad;

and there was still the family vault in the parish church where they could be buried if India spared them to die in England. Stella's grandfather, whom she could not remember, lay there with others of his name, and it had never entered grandmamma's mind to live or die anywhere but at The Chestnuts.

But to return to the drawing-room—a room that breathed of a people long connected with the East—here were sandal-wood boxes, caskets composed of porcupine quills, coloured clay models of Indian servants, brasses and embroideries. The warmth of the afternoon drew forth faint aromas still stored in these relics, mementoes of travel and service and adventure, the perfume that still hung in the folds of the handsome cashmere shawl draped about old Mrs. Carrington's shoulders.

It was she who opened the debate; failing her lead, neither of her daughters would have dreamed of alluding to their niece's outburst at the luncheon table.

"What do you imagine is wrong with Stella?" The old lady's sunken dark eyes, that yet were quick and bright, turned from one daughter to the other. The rest of her muscles were perfectly still.

"She is growing up," said Augusta boldly. She was the elder of the two and more nearly resembled her mother, physically and mentally, than did faint-hearted Ellen.

"She is still a child!" pronounced Mrs. Carrington, oblivious of the fact that she herself had been married at the age of seventeen, had sailed to India and returned with three children before she was twenty-one.

"Perhaps," ventured Ellen, "seeing Maud Verrall in church dressed as a grown-up young lady made her feel a little—well, I hardly know how to express myself—rather kept back?"

Ellen herself had been guiltily conscious of a vague feeling of envy caused by the sight of The Court people in all their prosperity and finery.

"Kept back from what?" demanded Mrs. Carrington. "Would you wish to see Stella trigged out like that forward monkey Maud Verrall?"

"Maud was always a most underbred child," said Augusta.

Ellen hastily took up the cue. "Yes, don't you remember the day she came to tea and broke the vase, and allowed Stella to be blamed? I saw her break it myself, but of course we could say nothing as Maud was our guest, and dear little Stella said nothing."

"But what has that to do with the way Stella behaved to-day?" inquired her sister. Ellen thought this rather unkind of Augusta.

"Oh! nothing, of course," Ellen admitted. "Only it just shows——"

"We are all aware that Stella has spirit," said grandmamma, ignoring this passage, "she is a true Carrington, but spirit in certain circumstances is a danger and not to be encouraged, just as in others it may be admirable. Now if the child had been a boy——"

The old lady's gaze turned to a portrait that hung over the mantelpiece—that of a gentleman in a blue velvet coat with lace and silver buttons, powdered hair and bold, bright eyes that seemed to smile on the little

feminine conclave in amused toleration. "Spirit" in a man was to be accepted and, whatever its consequences, condoned; but in a female, particularly in a young girl, it should be guarded against, suppressed. Ellen Carrington's eyes turned also to the portrait. Long years ago she had shown symptoms of "spirit" in connection with the attentions of a dashing young cousin who had strongly resembled the portrait. Mamma was antagonistic; he had sailed for India (just as had all male Carringtons one after the other), and the ship had gone down; so that his vow to return with a fortune and claim his sweet Ellen was never fulfilled.

Augusta, so far as anyone was aware, had known no romance. The family spirit in Augusta found outlet in a fierce devotion to her mother, and in the maintenance of a pathetically pretentious sort of state in the household; the very manner in which she would ring the bell might have argued the existence of a host of retainers. Not for worlds would she have answered the front door herself, neither would she have permitted Ellen or Stella to do so. Her attitude towards the domestic staff at The Chestnuts—old Betty, with a daily slave from the village, and the aged, bad-tempered factotum out of doors—was almost that of a Royal personage, punctilious in the matter of good mornings and thank yous, yet carefully distant as became the upholding of class distinction.

"It's a pity she was not a boy," said Augusta, "then she could have gone to school—a little more discipline——"

"Yes, Stella's education——" interrupted Mrs.

Carrington, and paused thoughtfully. Her daughters listened. Augusta was responsible for Stella's arithmetic, geography, history; Ellen for her progress in music, needlework, drawing. Was fault to be found with these educational efforts?—which in truth were not altogether congenial to the teachers, conscientiously though they pursued them. Stella was frequently tiresome, and she did such odd things—for example, she had "a trick," as they called it, of rising at dawn and rambling about the woods and commons and returning late for breakfast, and then she would be listless and inattentive for the rest of the day. At times she was "wild" and disobedient, although at others disarmingly docile and quick and affectionate. On the whole, the aunts were proud of their pupil; what was mamma about to say concerning Stella's education?

Mamma said: "Though unfortunately Stella is not a boy, I have lately been thinking that if a suitable school can be found—— What was the name of that friend of yours, Augusta, who years ago started a school for young ladies at Torquay?"

"Jane Ogle," said Augusta shortly. In the opinion of Augusta, Jane Ogle had lost caste when she opened a school. As the daughter of an officer, Jane should not have descended to such depths as the earning of her living when she had plenty of relations with any of whom she could have made her home in genteel idleness. Still, if mamma had any serious notion of a school for Stella it was so far fortunate that Miss Ogle had thus bemeaned herself, seeing that none of them knew anything about boarding schools

for girls, institutions which were to be regarded with suspicion.

"Then you really think, mamma," said Augusta incredulously, "that Stella needs different tuition, or at least different management?"

"Her behaviour to-day would point to it," mamma replied. "Perhaps you would write to Miss Ogle, my dear, and make inquiries as to her methods and terms. I am inclined to think Stella is getting a little beyond us in every way."

Stella, after rushing from the dining-room and up the stairs in such unladylike fashion, had thrown herself on her bed and wept until her ill-humour evaporated and she began to think more kindly of milk pudding and boiled mutton. Then, feeling hungry and rather ashamed, she had bathed her eyes and "tidied" her hair, and for a while sat and gazed from the low window of her bedroom—gazed on the familiar lawn sloping to a narrow stream that had been the cause of many punishments in her childhood, what with her attempts to jump it, the catching of imaginary fish, the sailing of paper boats, all of which had involved "getting her feet wet," a crime in the view of grandmamma and the aunts. The cedar tree on the lawn had also been a source of trouble, for Stella had never fought the temptation to climb it, and the climbing of trees was forbidden as not only hoydenish but disastrous to clothes—the same with the high wall of the kitchen garden. There seemed hardly a spot in the limited domain that for Stella was not associated with punishment; yet she

adored "the grounds," as Aunt Augusta entitled the garden, at all seasons of the year, and at this season she still found it heavenly to dabble in the stream, to climb the branches of the cedar tree, even to roll on the fragrant turf. . . . She loved the old house as well, though two of the rooms she had always avoided instinctively—grandmamma's bedroom was one; Stella felt it held secrets, there was something mysterious and "dead" in its atmosphere. The painted toy horse and the wooden soldier, the half-finished sampler, and the shabby doll enshrined on the chest of drawers seemed to her ghostly objects, sad reminders as they were of uncles and aunts who had never grown up. When, for any reason, she was obliged to enter the room it was as if these little dead uncles and aunts still hovered about the big bed with its faded chintz curtains, as if they were listening, watching, hating her for her being alive.

Aunt Augusta's room she also disliked; it might have been a spare room, so cold, so polished, so neat, and the enlarged photographs of bygone Carringtons, framed and hung on the walls, were hideous—all crinolines and strings of black beads and stove-pipe hats and long whiskers. . . . Aunt Ellen's room was different; it harboured an apologetic air of frivolity, imparted by gay little ornaments and a screen covered with Christmas cards and pictures cut from illustrated papers. Whenever Stella studied this screen she found something she had never noticed before. Above all, in one corner stood a cabinet containing drawers full of birds' eggs and butterflies collected by her father as a boy. Aunt Ellen was the only person who

would answer Stella's eager questions about her father, and even those answers told her too little—only that he had gone to India as a very young man, like all the Carringtons; that he was brave and handsome, that he had died in battle when his little daughter was about two years old.

And concerning her mother Stella had never succeeded in extracting definite information.

"She is dead, my dear," was all Aunt Ellen would say with grave reserve, "she died when you were born—in India." Was there a picture of her? No, there was no picture. What was she like? We never saw her. What was her Christian name? It was Stella—and clearly the name itself was not approved—considered foolish, fantastic.

Indeed the child's periodical questions on the subject of her mother were torture to the three secretive, old-fashioned women, who shrank from all remembrance of the shameless being who had bewitched their "poor Charles" and led him astray, dragging the name of Carrington through the divorce court. At the time of the scandal they had blamed Charles for marrying the abandoned creature, and when she died, a year later, they were glad, though she left an unwelcome infant who was promptly sent home by the widower to The Chestnuts. The child was, of course, received, but under protest, a protest that vanished when "poor Charles" was killed in a frontier skirmish, a death (for his country) that in the eyes of his mother and sisters fully atoned for his backslidings and the disgrace he had brought on a name that had ever been associated with brave deeds in the East.

Star of India

India!—the very word held a magic fascination for the child of "poor Charles." Stella loved the smell of the curios in the drawing-room, and her "great treat" on wet days was permission to open the camphor-wood chest on the landing; fingering the contents, she would feel almost intoxicated with the sight and scent of fine muslin veils heavily embroidered, funny little caps, tinsel-encrusted; a packet of pictures painted on talc of Indian ladies, black-haired, almond-eyed, smiling, wonderfully robed. At the bottom of the chest were pistols and daggers, and swords, all chased and inlaid with ivory and gold; and there was a carved box full of tiger claws, and silver ornaments, bracelets, anklets, and necklaces that jingled. . . . In addition to the camphor-wood chest there was the lumber room, a low attic that ran the length of the roof; here were stacks of other interesting relics, horns and moth-eaten skins of wild animals, hog-spears and clumsy old guns shaped like trumpets. Also piles of old books and pamphlets, packets of letters and papers, yellow, crumbling, tied up with string and thrown into cardboard boxes.

On this luckless Sunday afternoon Stella's mind turned to the lumber room. As yet she had not the courage to descend and face grandmamma and the aunts after the scene she had made at the dining-table; and presently she stole into the passage, that was lined with a wall-paper depicting Chinese scenes, square bordered, then ran up the ladder-like stairs leading to the long attic in the roof.

There, poring over old papers and pamphlets and books, she forgot Maud Verrall and all that young

person's advantages, forgot grandmamma and the aunts, and boiled mutton and her rebellious outburst against her own "lot"—forgot everything but India, the land of elephants and tigers, tents and palanquins, rajahs and battles, and marvels without end. She thrilled again as she read of Carringtons who had fought at Plassey and Paniput, in the Mahratta wars, and before the walls of Seringapatam. A Carrington had perished in the Black Hole of Calcutta, a Carrington had been the friend of Warren Hastings, in the Mutiny a Carrington had performed noble deeds; Carrington women and children had been sacrificed for the honour of their country. . . .

To-day Stella realised for the first time that her father must have been the last male Carrington of the line. No more Carrington exploits would be recorded in the history of British India. The name of Carrington in the East belonged solely to the past. Why, oh! why—had not she been born a boy?

CHAPTER II

Maud Verrall threw down her tennis racket; she said she was tired—a polite excuse for the termination of a game that afforded her no excitement. Stella Carrington was not a stimulating opponent; if she did not miss the ball, she sent it sky-high or out of court.

Stella saw through and sympathised with the excuse. "You see," she said regretfully, "I have had so little chance of practice. Even if we had a tennis court at The Chestnuts, there is no one for me to play with."

"Let's go into the Lovers' Walk and talk till tea-time," Maud Verrall suggested; if Stella could not play tennis she might at least prove a satisfactory recipient of confidences, and Maud had much to impart that would surely astonish the unsophisticated girl from The Chestnuts.

Arm in arm they strolled up and down the shady retreat arched over with lilac, laburnum, syringa, while Maud discoursed on the charms of the latest comic opera that had taken London by storm, and sang snatches of the songs to her envious companion; from that she went on to tell of boy-and-girl dances, and bicycling parties, and this led to disclosures concerning "desperate" adorers who were "perfectly mad" about Miss Verrall. There was one in particular—his name was Fred Glossop.

"Poor dear, he is awfully gone. I feel sorry for him. Would you like to see his photograph?" She drew a folding leather case from her pocket and displayed to the other's interested gaze the portrait of a handsome youth with curly hair and a distinct shade on his upper lip.

"Are you going to marry him?" inquired Stella.

"Oh! I shan't marry just yet," explained Maud. "I have told him so frankly. Perhaps in a couple of years, if I meet no one I like better, he might do. He is quite good looking, and he's going into the Army. I let him write to me—mother never bothers about my letters; but while I was still at school he had to write as if he was my dearest girl-friend—signed himself 'Lily'—because all our correspondence that was not in the handwriting of parents was opened. I'm to "come out" when we go back to London. I shall make my people give a fancy dress ball. What do you think of a Greek dress—white, with a key pattern in gold, and a big peacock feather fan?"

Stella was ruefully silent. She felt small and humble; there were no balls, no young men, no "coming out" on her dull horizon.

"And what about you?" asked Maud with kindly, if belated, interest; "you must have a deadly time in this hole all the year round. I'm tired of it already. How can you stand it?"

"I have to stand it!" said Stella, grimly resigned. "But I'm going to school—to a school at Torquay."

"How awful—a horrible place. I went there once after I had measles; and school, too, at your age! Hasn't the term begun?"

"I suppose so, but it does not seem to matter. Anyway, it will be a change."

"It won't be so bad if they take you to concerts and lectures, and you go out riding. Our riding master was a picture; lots of the girls were mad about him; but he liked me best because I didn't take too much notice of him. Believe me, my dear, men think all the more of you if you don't run after them. There was a creature always at the lectures we went to who gazed at me the whole time and used to follow us when we went out, trying to get near enough to speak to me. The other girls were frantic with jealousy. Once or twice I gave him the chance of slipping a note into my hand; it's quite easy—you put your hand behind your back, like this, and gaze in another direction, and if a governess happens to be too close, you just speak to her and distract her attention. I only once got into a row—it was coming away from church." . . .

This line of conversation was pursued whenever Stella was invited to The Court as company for Maud, and when Maud visited her friend at The Chestnuts. What, oh! what would have been the feelings of grandmamma and the aunts could they have overheard such vulgar, pernicious talk? To women of their type and upbringing this dawning of the most powerful of all instincts would have seemed a matter for the severest censure—not a natural symptom to be guided into safe and open channels, but a danger to be dealt with as sinful, corrupt. Intuitively Stella felt that Maud's enthralling confidences would be condemned with horror by her relations; and when Aunt Augusta,

vaguely suspicious, inquired one day what the two young people found to talk about, self-preservation prompted a careless and misleading reply: "Oh, I don't know; Maud's school, and all that sort of thing."

Reassured, Aunt Augusta considered this perfectly satisfactory and natural, seeing that Stella was soon to begin school-life herself.

Maud Verrall's egoistical communications, innocent enough in themselves (though scarcely to be commended), led, indirectly, after the manner of trivial happenings, to far-reaching results. One of the immediate consequences of Stella's newly awakened interest in the opposite sex was her expulsion from Miss Ogle's high-principled establishment before her first term was over.

From the moment of her arrival at Greystones Stella was in constant hot water. According to the school standards she was backward, and her capabilities were hopelessly unequal; she wasted hours that should have resulted in progress over work she disliked, whereas in the subjects that attracted her she outstripped her class. Her talent for music was undeniable, but she shirked the drudgery of practice, and her fatal facility for playing by ear was ever in the way. She was not popular, for she made no concealment of her contempt for sickly adorations and fashionable fawnings on governesses and senior girls. The life irked her, and her disappointment was keen to find that at Greystones there was no question of concerts and lectures; that no finishing extras figured on Miss Ogle's programme such as might have

afforded the sort of excitement described by Maud Verrall as an antidote to the monotony of school existence. She hated the daily crocodile walk; true, there was a tennis court, but the game was a monopoly of the first class, while the rest of the school marched two and two along dusty roads and uninteresting by-ways. Stella moped.

Then, one fatal afternoon, the daily procession passed through the town, a treat permitted once in the term, and as they all tramped the pavement of the principal thoroughfare, past fascinating shops that held the attention of governesses and girls, a flashy looking youth, loitering on the kerb, caught Stella's eye. She remembered Maud Verrall and that daring young person's adventures; what a triumph if she could tell Maud, in the summer holidays, that she had attracted the admiration of a real live young man! Maud had advocated a swift side-glance, especially if one had long eyelashes. Stella tried the experiment in passing the youth, who wore a loud waistcoat and had an immature moustache. She felt rather alarmed at her success. The young man responded with alacrity, and proceeded to follow the school at a discreet distance; followed when the "crocodile" turned to climb the hill; and was still in attendance when it reached the gate of the short drive.

Stella throbbed with excitement. She wondered what he would do now; would he linger outside; would he return to-morrow and be there when they emerged for the walk, just to obtain a glimpse of her as they passed? She thought his appearance rather dreadful; but at any rate, he was a young

man, an admirer; all that she regretted was that she could not write now and tell Maud Verrall how he had followed the school on a blazing hot day up a steep hill, all on her, Stella's, account!

A game of tennis was in progress as the girls filed up the sloping drive and scattered on the edge of the lawn, and at this moment, as it happened, a ball was sent over the privet hedge into the road below. Stella saw her chance.

"All right!" she shouted to the players. "I'll run and get it." And she raced back down the drive and through the open gate. There was the admirer lurking on the sidepath! He darted forward, an eager expression on his countenance that, even in her agitation, Stella remarked was sallow and spotty; also, as he grinned, she saw that his teeth were bad. What a pity! But it flashed through her mind that such drawbacks need not, when the time came, be cited to Maud. She would tell Maud, when they met, that he was "a picture!"

Affecting not to see him, and with a fluttering heart, Stella pounced on the tennis ball that lay in the middle of the road; and "the picture," murmuring something she could not catch, pounced also, and thrust a piece of paper into her hand. Just at that moment, by all the laws of ill-luck, Miss Ogle herself came in sight, advancing along the road, with floating veil and fringed parasol, returning from a private constitutional.

The letter that brought the appalling news to The Chestnuts of Stella's disgrace was addressed to Miss Augusta Carrington. Even the customary ignoring

of unpleasant facts was not proof against such a staggering blow. Stella! the granddaughter, the niece, the child they had cherished and guarded and reared with such care—to think that she should have been detected in a vulgar intrigue, and could no longer be harboured at Greystones lest she should contaminate her schoolfellows! It was almost too terrible to contemplate, and for once the three ladies permitted themselves the freedom of natural behaviour. Augusta very nearly stormed; Ellen wept bitterly; grandmamma said: "Like mother, like daughter," in an awful voice, and "What's bred in the bone will out in the flesh." The household was steeped in gloom. They all regretted that there was no male head of the family to whom they could turn for advice in this distressing difficulty; and it was Augusta who at last suggested that Stella's godfather, Colonel Crayfield, should be consulted. Was he not an old friend of "poor Charles"? And only a few days ago there had come a letter from him saying that he was at home on short leave from India, asking for news of his little goddaughter.

Augusta had answered the letter; how humiliating now, in the light of this subsequent catastrophe, to recall the hopeful description she had given of poor Charles's child! The confession of Stella's downfall, should they decide to consult Colonel Crayfield, would be a painful undertaking; but he was such a worthy, dependable character, and who could be more fitted, as they all agreed, to give counsel in such a terrible predicament than the child's own sponsor—the trusted friend of the dead father, since there was

no male member of the Carrington family to whom they could appeal?

Last time Colonel Crayfield came home, ten years ago, he had spent a couple of days at The Chestnuts—rather a trial for hostesses who were unaccustomed to the entertaining of gentlemen, but on the whole the visit was felt to have been a success. Mamma and Augusta had even suspected that he was attracted by Ellen, though, according to Carrington custom, neither had voiced the idea. Ellen, however, could have given him no encouragement, for nothing came of it, suitable as such an alliance would have seemed on both sides. Colonel Crayfield was that amphibious production of the Indian services—a military man in civil employ, holding responsible, well-paid office; on the occasion of his brief visit to The Chestnuts he had not disagreed with Miss Augusta when she expressed her admiration of missionary efforts in the East; he had only just tasted the wine that was offered him; he had not smoked in the house, though the pantry was at his disposal for the purpose. All these good points were recalled during the discussion that ensued as to whether he should be approached for advice concerning his goddaughter's future, and such recollections went far towards shaping the final decision of grandmamma and Augusta, tearfully supported by Ellen. The whole dreadful truth should be written to Colonel Crayfield, with an urgent invitation to visit The Chestnuts once more.

Meantime Stella was on her way home, shamefaced, unhappy. The fuss at Greystones had been frightful, the whole affair bewildering—the condem-

nation, the feeling of hopeless inability to defend herself; then the hasty packing, the self-righteous, disparaging attitude of the girls, and the stares of the servants; the humiliating departure, sentinelled to the last moment by Miss Ogle herself, wrathful and stern, who put her into a compartment for ladies only, in the care of the guard.

The time that elapsed between her return to The Chestnuts and the day of Colonel Crayfield's arrival was to Stella a species of purgatory. Grandmamma and the aunts hardly spoke to her, she was forbidden to go beyond the garden, no explanation of her conduct was invited, though, indeed, what explanation could she have given, since it was perfectly true that Miss Ogle had caught her receiving a note from a strange young man; and with it all she had not even had a chance to read the note—she would have given *worlds* to know what the young man had written!

The culprit was sent to the station in the village wagonette to meet her godfather, and she welcomed the distraction, awkward though it would be to face Colonel Crayfield in the uncomfortable circumstances. The situation struck her as almost grotesque; here she was, driving through the familiar lanes in the late July sunshine, as an outcast and a sinner, to meet an old gentleman who had been summoned to sit in judgment upon her! And, after all, she had done nothing worse, nothing half so bad, as Maud Verrall; and Maud had not been expelled from school as a sort of leper. She wished Maud was at The Court; but that happy young creature was disporting herself in London, and Stella had not the spirit left to write to her.

Arrived at the little countryside station, a six-mile drive from The Chestnuts, she seated herself on a bench to await the train from London, and gazed vacantly at the white palings, at the dazzling herbaceous border, butterflies floating above it. She felt sorely oppressed, but more from a sense of misfortune than from shame or repentance. How unlucky she was! The future held nothing enjoyable; she saw herself living on at The Chestnuts indefinitely. Grandmamma might die some day, but she and the aunts would grow older and older, and they would all continue to sing in church that they dared not choose their lot, and would not if they might. Stella remembered the case of Miss Spurt, the only daughter of a clergyman in a neighbouring parish, who, two or three years back, had run away with her father's groom-gardener. The scandal had petrified the county; whispers of it had reached Stella's sharp ears, though the subject was never mentioned in her presence at The Chestnuts. Now she wondered what had become of Miss Spurt, and she even began to sympathise with the poor girl's mad action.

Supposing she herself were driven to do the same sort of thing; to elope, for example, with the solitary porter who stood leaning against the waiting-room wall, should he suggest such a desperate step! She regarded him with idle attention, feeling stupefied with the prevailing somnolence of the station, the heat of the shadeless, empty platform; he was a fresh-looking boy, with a cap on the back of his head and a curl of glistening hair plastered to his forehead. Suddenly he stood erect, stretched his arms, gave

a loud yawn, and seized a handbell that he rang with deafening clamour. So here was the train at last, thank goodness!

One or two people hurried, perspiring, breathless, on to the platform; a few more ran over the rails from the opposite side, there being no footbridge; the station-master emerged from his office and took up a commanding position. The train rumbled in.

During the long, hot journey from London, Colonel Crayfield had been repenting his good-natured acquiescence to what seemed to him a rather exacting, inconsiderate request. At first his fancy had been tickled by the notion that he, an elderly bachelor, should present himself in this semi-parental rôle; also he was anxious to see the little girl, his godchild, who apparently threatened to follow in her mother's footsteps, though from what he remembered of Charles Carrington, she was more likely to have inherited unstable tendencies from her father! Charles had always been foolish and weak where affairs of the heart were concerned; but in his final "affair," with the young wife of a singularly unsuitable husband, he was certainly more to be pitied than blamed. That time he had really been *done for*, and he had behaved well in the circumstances; he, Colonel Crayfield, had stood by the guilty pair, and helped Charles to change his regiment, had consented to be sponsor to the unwelcome child. But, with the usual result of good-natured actions, it seemed that his responsibilities were never to end; and partly for the sake of Charles Carrington's memory, partly to

satisfy a newly aroused interest, here he was on his way to give counsel to three old prudes in the matter of a naughty girl who had got into a scrape at school! What form this counsel was to take he had not the remotest idea; he knew nothing about schoolgirls; probably it was all a storm in a teacup. What on earth had persuaded him to waste his time in such useless fashion!

As he stepped out of the train in company with a few women bearing market baskets and a sprinkling of farmers wearing breeches and gaiters, he wished again that he had not yielded to sentiment and curiosity; visits bored him; he had been bored on the last occasion, ten years ago, when he had gone on duty to The Chestnuts. He remembered the ordeal well: Charles's formal, austere old mother, his uninteresting sisters, the undrinkable wine, Charles's child of six or seven years old, who had sniffed and fidgeted and refused to make friends, and was no different from other children of her age; he even remembered that the village was a long distance from the station, and he hoped that neither of the Carrington spinsters had come to the station to meet him.

Stella, standing expectant on the platform, saw a powerful-looking man, clean shaven, blunt-featured, inclined to stoutness, who moved ponderously—rather like a big Chinaman, a mandarin. As she stepped forward he stared at her, and the stare gave her an odd feeling of shyness. She would have to introduce herself; he did not know that she was to meet him at the station. He was not at all what she had ex-

pected; she had pictured a fussy old person with a protruding stomach, a beard, and spectacles!

Colonel Crayfield was equally taken aback. His experienced glance had been instantly arrested by the vision of a remarkably good-looking girl, tall and slim, who, though her skirt only reached to her ankles, whose hair was tied back with a large ribbon bow, was clearly no child; and he had gazed at the vision as he would hardly have permitted himself to gaze had he realised that the girl was his goddaughter! All the same, the situation entertained him; he no longer wished he had refused to respond to Miss Carrington's appeal.

Colonel Crayfield raised his hat. "Then you are Stella—my godchild? How d'ye do, Stella?"

The radiant brown eyes met his own. What an unnecessarily pretty creature; no wonder there had been trouble connected with boys!

"Yes, they sent me to meet you," and she flushed with the consciousness that he knew of her misbehaviour.

"Very kind of them to send you; very kind of you to come!" He looked around. "Now for my bag," he added briskly, "and then we can be off."

Stella sighed with mingled doubt and relief; instinctively she felt that to Colonel Crayfield she was no criminal. Yet the remembrance of his glance when he first set eyes upon her, not knowing who she was, still disturbed her strangely. She abandoned all attempt to understand the doubt, and allowed her relief full play. Her spirits rose. During the drive to The Chestnuts she chattered freely, pointing out

landmarks, telling stories of the people and the past; and never once did her godfather allude to the reason of his coming, for which consideration she was deeply grateful.

On arrival at The Chestnuts even the solemn faces of grandmamma and the aunts could not depress her; she sprang from the wagonette and ran into the house with a gaiety most unbecoming in one who had been expelled from school on a charge that was truly shocking.

After tea she escaped, went down to the stream at the bottom of the garden and watched grandmamma pacing the terrace in front of the house on Colonel Crayfield's arm. Grandmamma wore her brown bonnet and her cashmere shawl, and carried her ebony walking-stick. Stella ached to know what they were saying; of course, it was to do with herself, and how she should be punished. If only that nice old fellow would devise some means of escape for her from her deadly imprisonment!

Mrs. Carrington was saying: "Stella is very irresponsible, and does not seem to realise how badly she has behaved. I fear she has inherited her mother's light nature, and what we are to do with her is a problem. It is not as if we could hope for a suitable marriage in the future, situated as we are."

"It is a difficult question," said Colonel Crayfield evasively. His eyes turned to the slim figure that flitted beside the stream. He knew by the weighty silence that followed that he was expected to make some useful suggestion.

At last he said desperately: "If I were not a bachelor and could offer her a chance in India——" then he paused.

Grandmamma glanced at him furtively. Was he thinking of Ellen? What an admirable solution of the difficulty were he to marry Ellen, and thereby not only secure a most suitable wife for himself, but provide an equally suitable haven for Stella till the child could be settled in life. And just at that moment, as if in response to the old lady's thoughts, Ellen herself came out of the house. Really, Mrs. Carrington reflected, Ellen did not look anything like her age, and she was dressed so becomingly—not too much in the present fashion, which all three ladies considered so ugly. Grandmamma suddenly discovered that she was fatigued; that she had taken sufficient exercise for to-day, and would step into the drawing-room for a rest before dinner. Oh, dear no!—Ellen and Colonel Crayfield must not trouble about her; no need for them to come indoors just yet on such a pleasant evening; she would prefer to be quiet, and perhaps a short nap. . . .

So Ellen and Colonel Crayfield took a little stroll in the garden, and the gentleman also took the opportunity to make a request connected with his own comfort.

"I hope I shall not be giving too much trouble, dear Miss Ellen," he said with diffidence, "but might a tray be put in my bedroom overnight? I am afraid I am a victim to old Indian habits, and one of them is that I wake very early and long for a cup of tea. I have my own kettle and spirit stand—I never move

without them in England—so that if a teapot and some tea, and a little milk——"

Ellen eagerly assented. Of course; it would be no trouble at all. She was *so glad* he should have mentioned it. "And I do hope you will ask for exactly what you want. I will tell Betty, and see that she arranges the tray properly."

"If it might be a fairly big teapot and a breakfast cup . . . " pursued Colonel Crayfield. (What he had suffered in English households from "dainty little morning tea-sets"!—a teapot the size of an apple, a cup to match, tea so thick and strong that it might have been jam.)

Ellen wondered nervously if there would be enough milk left overnight for the visitor's tray. Betty was always so careful not to take more than was actually required for the household. "I think I will just run indoors," she said apologetically, "and tell Betty what to do, so that she will be sure not to forget anything."

"You are more than kind!" exclaimed Colonel Crayfield with fervour; but he did not add that he hoped she would speedily return and continue their stroll. And when Ellen reappeared, smiling and triumphant, he was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Stella in sight; and Ellen finally discovered the pair in the kitchen garden.

Stella had crawled beneath a net that protected the gooseberries from the birds. Colonel Crayfield was standing stolid and large on the path, and Stella was handing him berries through the meshes of the net. He was not eating the fruit, and Ellen felt that

this was compatible with his dignity and his years. She could not imagine Colonel Crayfield sucking gooseberries and throwing the skins about! It seemed he was collecting them for Stella, who, bent double, was robbing the bushes—such an ungainly attitude for a young lady.

"Stella!" called Aunt Ellen in reproof, "you are tearing your frock!"

The child looked a disgraceful object as she emerged from the nets; a long rent in one of her sleeves disclosed a round white arm with a red scratch in the flesh, her face was crimson, her hair in disorder, she was covered with twigs and bits, and her mouth was sticky with gooseberry juice. Laughing, she held out her skirt, like an apron, for the fruit that filled Colonel Crayfield's large mahogany-coloured hands.

Ellen felt truly ashamed of her niece. What would Colonel Crayfield be thinking of his goddaughter, and of the way in which she had been brought up! Had Ellen observed the look in Colonel Crayfield's eyes at the moment, she would probably have mistaken it for astonished disapproval; as it was, she only observed that he gazed at Stella in silence, at the shining hair that fell over her forehead, at the wide-open brown eyes, thickly lashed and full of mischief, at the flushed cheeks and parted lips, that showed a row of faultless little teeth, and at the red scratch on the white forearm.

Stella, unabashed, proffered her skirt, full of fruit, to her aunt. "Do have some, Aunt Ellen," she cried joyously. "They're ripping, especially the big, hairy fellows."

"You will spoil your dinner," said Aunt Ellen severely, "as you have already spoilt your frock."

"Like little Miss Jane," and Stella chanted:

"Greedy, greedy little Miss Jane,
I'll never give *her* a present again.
She spent her sixpence on raspberry rock,
And spoilt her dinner as well as her frock."

Colonel Crayfield actually laughed; moreover, he accepted a gooseberry from Stella's grubby fingers and ate it fastidiously, burying the skin in the mould with the toe of his boot.

That evening grandmamma's hopes ran high. Augusta sent Stella to bed early, and afterwards Colonel Crayfield listened, apparently entranced, while Ellen played the piano—played "Yorkshire Bells" and "The Village Blacksmith."

CHAPTER III

VERY early next morning Colonel Crayfield was awakened by a crash. His bedroom was alight with the dawn; the lemon scent of magnolia blossom floated in at the open window. What had aroused him? Involuntarily he glanced at the tea-tray, at the big teapot and breakfast cup for which he had Miss Ellen to thank; then he became aware of a curious sound, and sitting up he beheld the milk-jug in fragments on the floor and a cat complacently lapping the milk that had spread in a pool on the carpet. In a fury he sprang from the bed, clapping his hands, shouting at the thief; the cat, ears back, tail on end, made for the window and disappeared in a flash; he could hear her scrambling down the magnolia tree. What about his tea! He hated tea without milk, and probably the household would not be astir for hours. He formed a bold project—he would go downstairs and forage for more milk. No one need hear him; he could explain, relate the disaster at breakfast. Slippers on his feet, and a coat over his sleeping-suit, he crept into the long, low passage. All was still. But the stairs! The stairs might have been actually alive and the banisters too; how they did creak! It was a relief to arrive at the foot of the staircase without having aroused the household. Now there was a green baize door that evidently gave on to the kitchen quarters; it yielded silently to his push, and he was

confronted with a short flight of stone steps. At any rate, *they* could not creak. Quickly descending them, he found himself in a large, old-fashioned kitchen, stone-paved; beyond, surely, was the larder where milk might be found, if the cat had not been there before him. How different it all was from Indian establishments; in India, whether as a guest or in one's own house, one could demand tea at any hour of the night or day, and it was forthcoming as a matter of course; in India——

"Hallo!"

Colonel Crayfield jumped ingloriously, and only just saved himself from swearing aloud. His god-daughter was standing in the larder doorway, a cup in one hand, a crust of bread in the other. She had the advantage of him in the matter of toilet, being fully dressed in a blue washing frock that fell in straight lines from her neck to her ankles, and a wide straw hat bound with a ribbon of the same colour.

They looked at each other, amazed. Colonel Crayfield drew his coat closer about him, and passed his hand mechanically over his hair.

"Good gracious!" he said resentfully.

"Did you hear me go down?" she inquired.

"No; but I wonder you didn't hear *me!* The stairs made such a confounded noise."

"Yes, I know; aren't they awful! I always expect Aunt Augusta to burst from her room with a poker in her hand. Were you looking for something to eat?"

"I was looking for some milk," he admitted; "a

cat got into my room and knocked down the milk-jug. I don't like tea without milk."

"I expect it was Granny."

"*Granny?*" repeated Colonel Crayfield, mystified.

Stella laughed. "Not my grandmother! Was it an old black-and-white cat with a very long tail?"

"I really did not notice. Anyway, the brute broke the jug and was drinking the milk——"

"Here you are then," she handed him a jug.

He took it. "But have you all you want yourself?" he inquired politely.

"Heaps," she replied, munching her crust. "Have a piece of bread? It's lovely—home made. I only wish I had an onion, too. Don't you love onions?"

"I don't object to them——" he began; then suddenly the unfitness of the situation came home to him with something of a shock. Here was he, the ruler of a vast area in India, accustomed to ceremony and circumstance and state, pilfering a larder with a chit of a girl—discussing onions, of all things; and further than that he was not dressed! It might have been a silly dream.

"And what are you doing down here at this extraordinary hour?" he asked of his goddaughter with what dignity was left to him.

"Eating and drinking, as you can see," was her flippant reply. Then, as though conscious that she was perhaps not treating Colonel Crayfield quite with the respect that was his due, she added primly: "I often get up very early and go for a ramble"; she hesitated, and continued with diffidence, "would you care to come for a walk instead of going to bed again?"

"Well, I can't come as I am; but if you will wait till I've had my tea and dressed——"

"Of course I'll wait! I'll leave the side door open and you'll find me outside."

Later, when he joined her, his self-respect as Commissioner of Rassih restored, he said: "Indian life would suit you, since you are so fond of early rising. In India I am nearly always out soon after daybreak."

Stella sighed. "Oh! India—how I should love to go there!"

"Really? What about the heat and the exile and the insects?"—and he added playfully—"not to speak of snakes and tigers!"

"I'm not afraid of anything!" bragged Stella, and with the elimination of grandmamma this was true enough. "If it comes to exile, what could be worse than life at The Chestnuts—where nothing ever happens, and nothing will ever happen!"

Now they were out of the garden, out on a common that was ablaze with gorse—the spongy turf was silvered with dew, the air fragrant and fresh; birds' voices, the distant lowing of cattle, echoed in the sweet stillness.

"But some day you will marry," prophesied Colonel Crayfield, in a tone of encouragement.

"Marry!" derided Stella. "Who is there for me to marry?" She thought of Miss Spurt and of the young porter at the railway station.

He made no answer; he was appraising the slim, young form beside him, marking the grace of her limbs, the poise of the little head on the long, round neck, the clean turn of ankle and wrist—every point

was good; in a couple of years she must be a magnificent woman.

"What are you thinking about?" inquired Stella. "Here we are at the end of the common and you've hardly spoken a word. Are you tired?"

"Tired? Certainly not! It would take rather more than a walk across a common to tire *me!*" He stepped out with vigour.

"What long strides you are taking. Hadn't we better have a race while we are about it? See that oak tree over there—at the edge of the wood? I bet you I'll get there first. One, two, three—off!"

And the Commissioner of Rassih, who could still hold his own at tennis and rackets, accepted the challenge. The race ended in a dead heat.

Stella flung herself down beneath the oak tree, and Colonel Crayfield took a seat, formed by the roots, beside her. The fact that he was scarcely out of breath pleased him.

"Anyway, you can run!" pronounced Stella.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Oh, I don't know." She was politely evasive; it would hardly do to explain that such agility in anyone of his age and bulk had surprised her, and she hastened to change the subject. "Now, do let us talk about India"—she looked up at him with eager, bright eyes—"you don't know how I long to see India. I suppose it's in my blood; all the Carringtons did things in India, and if I had been a boy I should have gone out to do things, too. I am the last young Carrington left—and I am only a girl!"

Colonel Crayfield took off his hat and ran his

fingers through his thick, grey hair; he was proud of its thickness; most men of his age in India were hopelessly bald.

"India isn't what it was; the spirit of romance and adventure has gone, the pagoda tree is dead, prices are rising, and exchange is falling——"

"But haven't you lovely big houses?" interrupted Stella, "and heaps of servants and horses, and the sun and gardens and fruit? What is your bungalow like in India?"

He checked his inclination to grumble. "It isn't a bungalow. It's part of a Moghul fort, built on the walls of the old city; the wall goes right round the compound; a compound is——"

"Yes, I know what compound means! I know compound, and tiffin, and chuprassee, and peg, and lots of words. I find them in all the old family letters put away in the lumber room. Do go on!"

"Well, I believe the city in the old days used to come close up to the wall, but it has gradually been moved farther away. The back of the house looks on to a desert that stretches for miles——"

"Is it a big station?"

"No; it's a small civil station; too small considering that it's the headquarters of a big charge."

"It must be ripping to feel you are ruling, governing all the time! Don't you love power—spelt with a capital P?"

"Who doesn't? But there are definite drawbacks as well as compensations in Indian service."

She sighed. "I shall never see the country; never feel the Indian sun, or smell an Indian bazaar. I shall

never hear a tom-tom or the frogs' chorus in the rains, or even see a snake, except in the Zoo or in a bottle ! "

Colonel Crayfield gazed at the child in astonishment. He guessed nothing of the grip that the old letters and memoirs, stored in the lumber room, had on her imagination; he had no conception of the strength of hereditary memory, of the spell bequeathed by a long line of forbears whose lives had been spent in the East, whose hearts and minds and souls had been bound up with India—their mighty relentless mistress. He met, in puzzled silence, the frank gaze of the lovely limpid eyes that stirred his blood, tempting him in all opposition to his reason and foresight; yet, just as his activity in the race to the oak tree had pleased him, flattered his pride in his physical preservation, so did this amorous thrill.

Stella looked away, disconcerted; something in his expression reminded her of his first glance on the platform the previous afternoon; she did not understand it, and it made her vaguely uneasy. She rose, brushing her skirt, uttering hasty little remarks—it was getting late, they ought to go back, breakfast would be ready, look at the sun !

Yes, the sun by now was well up in the sky; a hot summer sun that sucked the dew from foliage and turf, creating a mist, like smoke, dispensing strong perfumes of earth, promising great heat for the day. To the man whose youth lay behind him, it strengthened his ardour, tempting him to take possession of this exquisite child by means of her mania for India, her boredom with her present life and surroundings. Then, suddenly, he remembered that his mission to

The Chestnuts was to administer reproof; to give profitable advice! As they re-started across the common he said abruptly: "You know why I have come to The Chestnuts?"

The girl flushed. "Yes," she said reluctantly; here it was at last, the lecture, the blame, just when she had almost forgotten. It was beastly of her godfather. "Need we talk about it now?"

"We shall have to talk about it some time, I suppose." His tone reassured her; it sounded as if, after all, he was rather more on her side than on that of grandmamma and the aunts. Still she felt suspicious.

"What did you do, exactly?"

"Well, I made eyes at an awful young man when we were out for a walk in the town," she blushed deeper at the recollection; "it was just to see what would happen more than anything else—like pulling a dog's tail. Oh! I can't explain. Nobody will ever understand——"

"And what did happen?"

With difficulty she told him, and awaited his censure. To her astonished relief he said: "Bad luck! You see the wicked don't always prosper!"

"But was I so wicked?" she asked defensively. "A girl I know told me she had done the same kind of thing often; she didn't think it was so dreadful. It seems to me an awful fuss about very little, and I don't know why you should have been bothered, even though you are my godfather. What shall you advise them to do?"

"At present," he said cryptically, "I am not quite sure."

She glanced at him half-alarmed. He laughed. "How would you like it if I advised them to send you out to India?"

Stella gasped. "Oh! would you? But how? As a missionary, a companion, a governess—what?"

Again he laughed. "As a companion, perhaps. I'm afraid you would not be much good as a missionary or a governess. What do you think yourself?"

"I shouldn't care. I'd do anything to get to India."

"Well, we shall see. Don't be too hopeful," he looked at his watch. "What time is breakfast?"

"Half-past eight—prayers first."

"Then step out!" Enough had been said for the moment.

"Oh! dear," complained Stella, "what a bother things are; you are as bad as Aunt Augusta about being in time. Why don't you marry Aunt Augusta?"

"She mightn't appreciate India," he said with a grin.

Grandmamma seldom came down to breakfast. Augusta read prayers, fiercely, glaring at her congregation as though to remind them of their unworthiness. Ellen kept her eyes shut and responded with fervent contrition. Neither sister was as yet aware of the guest's early expedition with their niece, and, as Stella made no mention of it during the meal, Colonel Crayfield preserved a discreet silence on the subject. There was a letter for Stella on the breakfast table. The aunts eyed her with suspicion as she read it and then hastily consigned it to her pocket. The

letter was from Maud Verrall; it contained wonderful news:

"My dear, what do you think? I am engaged to be married in spite of all my resolutions not to commit myself in a hurry. No, it is not poor Fred Glossop, who is wild with despair, but a Captain Matthews in the Indian Cavalry. He *is* a positive picture, if you like; rather in the style of the riding-master I told you about, but much, *much* handsomer. My people aren't pleased, but that only adds to the excitement. There is nothing they can object to definitely; he has a little money of his own, and isn't badly connected. Of course, they expected me to choose a lord, or a baronet at least; but I am very unworldly. I am awfully happy, and frightfully in love. I am sure I shall enjoy myself hugely in India. Don't you wish you were me?"

Stella groaned over this letter in the privacy of her bedroom. Indeed, how she wished she were Maud!—who was going to India, not as a missionary, or a governess, nor in any other servile capacity; but as the wife of a cavalry officer! Colonel Crayfield was wrong; it was the wicked who prospered. As compared with herself, Maud had certainly been wicked, and now here was Maud rewarded with all that Stella would give her ears to attain. She wept with envy; felt convinced that her godfather had overrated his power to lighten her "lot"; and in any case grandmamma and the aunts would oppose whatever plan he might suggest. She was doomed to grow

old at The Chestnuts; she was never to marry, never to enjoy herself, never to reach India—the Mecca of her dreams. If only that beast Maud had not been going to *India!* Stella felt bitterly jealous; it was all so cruel, so hopeless. . . .

Reluctant to appear with swollen eyelids, she remained in her room for the rest of the morning; also because she wished to allow her godfather every chance of imparting his advice, however fruitless it might be, to her guardians. She presented herself at luncheon, but the atmosphere seemed unchanged. Evidently nothing had happened, for she was still ignored by her relations, and Colonel Crayfield, purposely, she suspected, though not with unkindly intention, paid small heed to her presence.

After luncheon she was dispatched by Aunt Augusta on household errands.

"I am being got out of the way," said Stella to herself as she set off with a can of soup for old Mrs. Bly, and an order for bacon and rice at the post office —the postal department being a sort of incidental appendage to the only shop of the village; stamps and post cards were also required. Then she was to call for eggs and butter at a farmhouse quite a mile and a half away. She made no haste; the longer the palaver concerning her future, that she hoped was taking place during her absence, the better. The farmer's wife, Mrs. Capper, made her welcome, gave her tea with honey and fresh-baked bread, told her "what a fine growed young lady she was getting"; all of which was pleasant and consolatory for the time being, especially when young Capper came in, look-

ing quite gentlemanlike in a tweed coat with leather patches on the shoulders, and breeches and gaiters; he betrayed unmistakable admiration for his mother's guest—Stella could hardly prevent him from escorting her home to carry the basket; not that she would have objected to his company, but somebody would be sure to espy them and tell old Betty, and old Betty would tell Aunt Augusta, and it would all be attributed to her own fast and unladylike tendencies, and add to her present disfavour. The risk was not good enough; young Capper would keep till she knew the result of Colonel Crayfield's intercession on her behalf. Despite the little distraction she strolled home listless and depressed.

CHAPTER IV

Tea in the drawing-room was over. Mrs. Carrington sat erect, motionless as usual. Augusta and Ellen were pretending to knit; in reality their whole attention was given to Colonel Crayfield, who perambulated about, large and imposing, his hands in his pockets, a disturbance in the old-world atmosphere. Augusta noticed with irritation how he scuffled up the edge of the Persian rug spread in the centre of the room each time he walked over it. Ellen suspected that he wanted to smoke, but she dared not suggest the permission. The Carrington ancestor, gaily indifferent, gazed down at the little conclave that was concerned with the misdeeds of his young descendant.

"It is a difficult question," repeated Colonel Crayfield; he had said the same thing already, several times.

"Would you recommend another school?" asked Augusta. "Some stricter establishment, perhaps, if one could be found, that would receive a girl under the painful circumstances?"

Colonel Crayfield halted beside a table. He picked up a long, narrow scent-bottle, and appeared to examine it closely. Augusta hoped he would not let it fall; the bottle had come from Delhi, was said to have been the property of a Moghul princess, and once to have contained attar of roses.

"Well, on the whole, no," he said presently. "We don't want to break the child's spirit."

"Spirit!" echoed old Mrs. Carrington. "She has the evil spirit of her mother, not the spirit of her father's people, which I foolishly imagined might have counteracted failings inherited from the other side."

To Augusta's relief, Colonel Crayfield replaced the precious scent-bottle, and addressed himself to the three ladies. "If you will pardon my plain speaking, I think you are making too much of this —this indiscretion of Stella's. I had a talk with her this morning——"

"This morning?" cried Augusta and Ellen together, and the three pairs of eyes were fixed on him in amazed curiosity.

"Yes; this morning, before breakfast," he confessed calmly, "and my opinion is that Stella meant no harm. She is growing up, is no longer a child, and she needs more outlet. School is hardly the place for her now."

"But what would you suggest?" came faintly from Ellen.

Mrs. Carrington shot a quick glance at him. She was recalling their conversation on the terrace the previous afternoon; he had said, "If I were not a bachelor, and could offer her a chance in India——" Then he had strolled in the garden with Ellen, and had enjoyed Ellen's music after dinner. Was it in his mind to seek the hand and the heart of her younger daughter?

"A plan has occurred to me," he continued, with caution; "but I am not at all sure—in fact, subject

to your permission," he bowed slightly to the trio, "I should prefer to wait a little before saying anything further."

Mrs. Carrington smiled, and at the moment she resembled a hawk more than a sea-gull. With a gracious gesture of assent she rose. "Augusta, my dear," she said suavely, "will you assist me upstairs? I feel rather fatigued. This discussion has been trying, and I think"—again she shot a sharp glance at Colonel Crayfield—"we may leave the solution of our unhappy difficulty with every confidence to our poor dear Charles's old friend."

Augusta dutifully supported her mother from the room; but, to Mrs. Carrington's exasperation, the tiresome Ellen must needs come too, instead of allowing Colonel Crayfield this obvious opportunity of paying his addresses.

Therefore Colonel Crayfield found himself alone in the drawing-room, and he was only too thankful for the relief. Now he could think connectedly. In no way had he committed himself, so far, to any suggestion. Should he ultimately decide that to marry the girl was too serious a step to take, he could still advise something quite different from the idea that was so strongly seductive. . . . He might suggest that Stella should be sent to some Anglo-Indian friends of his own in London as a paying guest, he being financially responsible; or he could offer to find some family in India, when he returned there, who would be willing to take charge of a girl as a matter of business, he, as her godfather, paying expenses. The money was nothing.

As he roamed round the room, doubtful, undecided, his eyes fell on the group of coloured clay models of Indian servants set out on a papier-mâché bracket, and he paused, for they recalled the existence of Sher Singh, his Hindu bearer, who for the past twenty-five years had been his right hand and chief of his domestic staff, and who perhaps knew more about Robert Crayfield than any other living being. Sher Singh would not welcome a memsahib. At the same time, the fellow would hardly be such a fool as to jeopardise his own valuable position by making trouble; the almighty rupee would soon settle Sher Singh's objections, and Stella must be made to understand that interference with the head servant's authority in the household could not be permitted. . . . Thus the Commissioner of Rassih endeavoured to exorcise the inopportune vision of his confidential retainer, who, he was aware, bore a faint, fantastic likeness to himself. People would sometimes remark, laughing, "Like master, like man."

He looked out of the window to see Stella crossing the lawn, a basket on her arm; and he noted afresh the splendid promise of her young form, the grace of her proportions, the perfection of feature and colouring. Truly she was well worth a drastic upheaval of his mode of life, a price that was hardly too high, all things considered. Involuntarily as he watched her, he began to make plans for the future. The big bedroom that overlooked the gardens at Rassih? No, it was not so cool in the hot weather as the one he had hitherto occupied himself,

which gave on to the vast desert area at the back of the house. True, his present room held tragic associations; his predecessor in the appointment had committed suicide from the balcony, throwing himself over the parapet down on to the rubbish and scrub far below, where in the night time hyenas and jackals yelled and fought and made diabolical merriment. . . . And then there was the bathroom door, scarred with sabre cuts and bullet holes, hideous reminders of a mutiny massacre where women and children—— But that all belonged to the past. Stella need never be told of such horrors, nor of the stories of footsteps, and cries, and unaccountable noises—servants' superstitious nonsense that, of course, he scoffed at and suppressed, though sometimes, when the heat kept him awake at night, he had even imagined that he heard them himself. . . . The drawing-room should be renovated; he had never used it; he would order a piano from Calcutta.

Stella disappeared round the corner of the house, and Colonel Crayfield realised with a sense of mingled triumph and incredulity that he had actually made up his mind, that he had done with all hesitation. And when Robert Crayfield once made up his mind he did not alter it.

A timid cough in the doorway disturbed his reflections. It was Ellen Carrington, driven back to the drawing-room by her mother under pretext that good manners did not permit of a guest being left solitary, unentertained. She fluttered to a seat, prepared to make polite, impersonal conversation; but Colonel Crayfield trampled on the intention.

"Well, and what do you think of it all, Miss Ellen?" he inquired confidentially; at any rate, she seemed to him the most human of the three females. His tone gave her a nice little sense of importance.

"I expect you are right. We may have taken things too seriously. But Stella's conduct did seem very—rather——"

He broke in abruptly. "Can you keep a secret?" And as his companion looked up alarmed, he added, smiling, "Only for a short time?"

"I—I hope I can." She had so little experience of secrets, and the very word "secret" savoured of deceit!

"Well, it's this. I intend to take Stella back with me to India. I intend to marry her."

Ellen gasped. Totally unprepared as she was for such a disclosure, it left her dumbfounded, also vaguely shocked. To her maidenly mind there was something indelicate in the notion of *Stella,* who was little more than a child, *married,* and to a man so very much her senior. Oh, dear! In all her bewilderment Colonel Crayfield's voice sounded oddly distant.

"I'm so—so surprised!" she faltered.

"I admit that she is young enough to be my daughter, but surely the drawback goes for nothing if I am prepared to accept it. Consider the advantage for Stella!"

It was beyond Ellen's power to voice her feelings. She was only aware of a nebulous resentment that she could not define even to herself, much less aloud to the man who had caused it.

"As my wife," he went on, glad to give utterance to his arguments, "she will have an assured position, she will be suitably provided for, *and* she will be well looked after—I can promise you *that!*"

The last sentence sounded to Ellen more like a threat than a promise. Her silence puzzled Colonel Crayfield, annoyed him. He had anticipated expressions of delight, of gratitude; he felt he had every reason to expect them; yet this limp, bloodless old maid appeared totally unimpressed by the benefits he proposed to shower upon her niece, seemed even to disapprove of the whole business. He brushed from his mind the impatience her odd behaviour had aroused.

"I am in no doubt as to Stella's reception of my purpose," he could not resist telling her, with pointed satisfaction; and had Miss Ellen been capable of such vulgarity she would have sworn that she saw him lick his lips. . . . She shrank, instinctively disgusted, and gathered up her knitting with trembling hands.

"Will you excuse me?" she stammered; even her mother's orders could keep her no longer in the room; she felt as if Colonel Crayfield had suddenly turned into a sort of ogre. "I—I have a letter to write that must catch the post." And with this, one of the few lies she had ever told in her life, she sidled past him to the door.

He looked after her in contemptuous wonderment; then stepped out of the window in search of his future bride. Probably she was eating goose-

berries, and the kitchen garden had this advantage, that it was not overlooked by windows, though it was hardly the spot he would have chosen for love-making. But Stella was nowhere to be found, and returning at last to the house, he had no better luck: the place seemed deserted. Where had they all hidden themselves?

He could not know that Stella was an unwilling prisoner upstairs, helping Aunt Augusta to sort household linen; that Mrs. Carrington, still resting, believed him to be enjoying the society of Ellen, whereas Ellen had locked herself into her bedroom, helplessly perturbed.

Only just before dinner did he have the chance of speaking to Stella without being overheard. "I saw you come back," he said to her, a tender inflection in his voice. "Were you tired? Was the basket heavy?"

"Oh, no," she replied mischievously; "I only felt overburdened with virtue. A handsome young man wanted to carry the basket for me, and I would not let him!"

"Thought you might be found out?" he suggested with a chuckle.

"That was about it!" she said, recklessly candid. "Oh, *do* tell me: was anything settled this afternoon? I know you were all talking me over. Am I to stay here for the rest of my life?"

"Have a little patience," he teased, finding a subtle pleasure in her obvious disappointment with his reply.

That evening, after dinner, he discovered that

Stella had a voice. She sang a little song, something about a star, to Aunt Ellen's accompaniment, and though Stella herself was clearly bored by the words of the song, and despite lack of training and feeling, her voice was deep and sweet—well worth cultivation, as he quickly decided. She should have singing lessons before they sailed for India.

The song ended, he found an opportunity to whisper: "That was delightful. Stella—a star! Some day perhaps a star of India?"

"But that's a decoration, isn't it?" she asked, pleased and eager. "And not for women? Have you got it?"

He looked at her intently, narrowing his eyes. "No, I haven't got my star—*yet*."

"But you will have it—soon?"

"Yes, very soon."

Stella felt mystified. Had she said the wrong thing? Perhaps it was a sore point with him that he had not received the distinction earlier?

"Can you sing?" she inquired quickly, to change the subject.

"Well, I used to," he admitted.

"Oh, do let us see if we have any songs you know. Aunt Ellen, Colonel Crayfield will sing if we can find something he knows."

There followed much turning over of music, but without success. Then Stella lifted the lid of the small ottoman that served as a piano-stool, disclosing several bound books of music; she dragged them forth; beneath them lay a number of songs in manuscript. Ellen intervened.

"You will find nothing among those; they are so old," she said hastily, as again her niece delved, and produced "Wings," "Adieu," "The Arab's Farewell to His Favourite Steed."

Colonel Crayfield shook his head at them all, but he laid his hand on the next sheet of music that, in spite of Aunt Ellen's unaccountable obstruction, was excavated by Stella.

"That!" he exclaimed, mingled recognition and reluctance in his tone. Forthwith Stella placed it on the stand and began to read the accompaniment, that might have been transcribed with a pin.

"Now?" She looked up at her godfather, gaily insistent.

And Colonel Crayfield, with an air of amused capitulation, sang in a good bass voice that was not so very rusty:

"I gave my love a little rose,
A little rose of red and white,
Because her colour comes and goes
Whene'er I dawn upon her sight.

I gave my love a little key,
A little key of yellow gold,
Because she locks her sweets from me,
And will not her dear heart unfold.

I gave my love a little dove,
Around its neck a feathery ring,
Because a ring betokens love,
And love to my sweet love I bring.

And in return what gave my love
Of all the precious gifts that be?
No rose, nor key, nor ring-necked dove—
She gave but her sweet self to me!"

Mrs. Carrington and Augusta murmured polite applause, though they thoroughly disapproved of the words. They said they had heard the song before, though they could not recall when, or by whom, it had been sung.

Ellen could have told them. Poor Ellen! The gay young cousin had sung it, sung it to *her* in those far-off days that now were as a faint, impossible dream. She herself had copied the music and the words with an etching pen, and purposely had buried the manuscript at the bottom of the ottoman where for so long she had guarded it jealously. Only on the rare occasions when she was alone in the house did she take it out and tinkle the accompaniment, whispering the words. It seemed a sort of sacrilege to Ellen that the song should have been exhumed by the careless Stella to be sung with zest in a loud voice that destroyed the echo of the beautiful tenor, the remembrance of which caused her heart to ache and brought tears to her eyes.

Stella, with girlish enthusiasm, pronounced the song to be "perfectly sweet," and proceeded to hunt through the rest of the pile. Colonel Crayfield watched her lithe movements; he was well satisfied with his own performance, and he smiled to himself as he recollected the last occasion on which he had sung this song—to a pretty young married woman

with whom at that time he was pleasantly philandering; the lady had burst into tears at the piano, an affecting scene had ensued, and the husband had all but surprised them; it had been just touch-and-go, a Providential escape. What on earth was her name? He could only remember that her hair was golden and her eyes like forget-me-nots!

Never mind, it did not matter; all that mattered to him was this exquisite child who was to learn the facts and the meaning of marriage from him and from him alone. . . . If only the three tiresome old women were out of the room—the two spinsters, scraggy and genteel; the old mother, austere and cold; and to add to his provocation, when Mrs. Carrington beckoned Stella to her side that she might kiss her good-night, he heard the old lady forbid her to go out before breakfast next morning. No reason was given, only the order. What tyranny! Was it any wonder that, apart from everything else, Stella should yearn to escape from The Chestnuts? Stella glanced at him ruefully over her grandmother's head; he returned her a nod of sympathetic understanding. Next day it should all be different. He enjoyed the prospect of astounding the old martinet.

The following morning Mrs. Carrington was not so easy to corner. When she appeared Ellen was in close attendance, and Stella was on duty with Augusta, occupied with household tasks that seemed to involve strenuous attacks on cupboards, and perpetual visits to the kitchen, whence came hot, sweet

whiffs of jam-making. Colonel Crayfield wandered aimlessly in the garden, consoling himself with plans for the immediate future. The marriage must take place as soon as possible—he supposed it would have to be in the village church—but a special licence would expedite matters. In little more than a couple of months his leave would be up—it would allow only just time for Stella to have riding lessons, singing lessons, to collect the right sort of outfit, for which, of course, he would be responsible. No village dressmaker, no ready-made garments for *his* wife. His own particular star should shine in every detail.

At last; there was the old lady, alone on the terrace, settled in a big basket chair, a mushroom-shaped hat tied on with a broad ribbon, her ebony stick handy, a small table at her side on which lay spectacles, a handkerchief, and the paper which arrived at midday. Colonel Crayfield approached her; formal greetings were exchanged, then he took an uncomfortable little garden chair from its resting-place against the wall and applied himself to business.

"Now," he said briskly, "I am ready to tell you what I propose should be done about Stella."

Mrs. Carrington pouched her cheeks, and intimated silently that she also was ready—to listen. He trusted she would not have a stroke when she heard what he was about to propose!

"It may seem a very sudden decision on my part, Mrs. Carrington," he began; "but I wish to take Stella into my own keeping——"

At once Mrs. Carrington was all gracious acquiescence. (Ellen! He had spoken to Ellen?)

"Perhaps I can guess the means by which you intend to bring about such an excellent solution of our difficulties," she remarked, with an arch expression that struck him as grotesque; and before he could continue, she added: "I may tell you that I had my suspicions ten years ago!" (Good heavens! What could she mean?) "I may also say that in my opinion nothing could be more suitable."

"I am afraid we are at cross purposes," said Colonel Crayfield carefully. From his own standpoint he felt that the marriage could hardly be termed "suitable," though the gain for the girl was undeniable.

"Then will you kindly explain?" demanded Mrs. Carrington.

"Certainly. It is my intention to marry your granddaughter."

Grandmamma stared at him. Then she grabbed her stick and struck it sharply on the ground. "My good man, are you in your senses?" she cried. "Do you realise that Stella is not only a child, but that she has bad blood in her veins? That such an unnatural union could only result in disaster? Now, if it had been Ellen, her aunt——"

The old lady's natural reserve had been blown, as by a volcano, sky high.

So that was the idea! Colonel Crayfield only just saved himself from laughing aloud.

"But you see," he said lightly, "it is not Miss Ellen—fortunately for me, since I fear she would hardly welcome me as a suitor."

Mrs. Carrington ignored this playful attitude.

"It is a preposterous idea! You are not a young man. Have you considered the cost and the risk?" Her voice was severe.

"Why," he argued judicially, "should there be any 'risk,' as you call it? After all, I am not such a Methuselah, and surely you can trust me to safeguard my wife's honour and happiness as well as my own?"

"In the present, no doubt. But what about the end of it all? In ten, even twenty years' time, Stella will still be a young woman, while you——" Her pause was cruelly pointed.

Colonel Crayfield glowered. Confound the old devil; there must be an end to this croaking, these distasteful forebodings. Assuming indifference, he stretched out his legs. The chair wobbled ominously, and rising with precautionary haste, he began to pace backwards and forwards before his aged adversary. Her opposition was so unexpected!

"It seems to me," he said, keeping his temper with an effort, "that Stella would be infinitely better off as my wife than if she stayed here, perhaps to marry beneath her, perhaps never to marry at all? I can't take her to India as my ward or as my adopted daughter. I'm not quite old enough for *that!*"

"How old are you?" inquired grandmamma spitefully.

"Not much over fifty," he told her, with disarming readiness, "and I flatter myself that I am young for my age. I am well off; I am willing to make suitable provision for my widow. What more can you want?" He spoke now with truculence.

"Well, I suppose you must cut your own throat, if you are so minded," said grandmamma; "but perhaps Stella may not care to marry a man old enough to be her father—even, to stretch a point, her grandfather!"

"We shall see!" was his confident answer.

The old lady sat silent. She was deeply disappointed, so convinced had she felt that it was Ellen he was after, and that Stella would be going to India beneath Ellen's safe wing. It was so seldom her wishes were thwarted, so seldom her disapproval of anything bore no weight.

Presently she said, "And when do you suggest that this extraordinary marriage should take place?"

"Just as soon as it can all be arranged. I may say that I wish to be responsible for Stella's outfit—indeed, for all expenses."

Mrs. Carrington's expression became a little less disagreeable. Money was not plentiful at The Chestnuts. After all, no one could deny that in a way it was a good enough chance for the child. But settlements must be certain. If Stella got into trouble, there must be no returning her, penniless, to her people, disgraced into the bargain.

"I can only give my consent provided that Stella will be perfectly secure, financially, whatever happens in the future."

Colonel Crayfield smiled; it was, as Mrs. Carrington felt, a smile that was covertly insulting. "When I have spoken to Stella," he said slowly, "I shall return to London and make proper arrangements with my lawyer. My intentions will be sub-

mitted to you, and I hardly imagine you will find fault with them."

"Very well, then; there is no more to be said at present. But do not forget that I have warned you."

"I appreciate your concern on my behalf, Mrs. Carrington; but, believe me, I think you are unduly apprehensive."

"Let us hope so," said Mrs. Carrington grimly; and it was a relief to them both when, at this moment, Augusta stepped out of the drawing-room to remind her mother that luncheon would soon be on the table, to suggest that the sun was rather powerful, and would it not be wiser for mamma to come indoors?

CHAPTER V

After all, Colonel Crayfield was driven to proposing in the kitchen garden. Stella was sent there, when luncheon was over, to pick more fruit for jam-making, that serious ceremony being now at its height; not even the presence of an important guest in the house could be permitted to delay its progress. Colonel Crayfield volunteered in public to help his god-daughter; Ellen's pale eyes flickered, grandmamma was coldly silent; only Augusta, who, as yet, was ignorant of his intentions, uttered conventional protests. Why should he trouble? It was so hot out of doors; Stella was well used to the little task, and required no help—would he not prefer to sit quiet with a book, or the paper? Colonel Crayfield was equally punctilious—no trouble, a pleasure. . . . Though, unfortunately, unversed in the business of fruit picking for jam, he would feel it a privilege to be allowed to contribute his share of assistance, and so on.

At last the pair set off, armed with huge baskets, towards the sun-blistered door let into the old brick wall of the garden.

"I will join you as soon as I can," Augusta called after them kindly.

"I hope she won't!" said Colonel Crayfield, to the malicious delight of Stella, who promptly echoed the hope. For the first time she felt reconciled to the

tedious duty, for surely now was her chance to coax Colonel Crayfield into giving her at least some sort of notion as to what was to happen.

As they opened the rickety door he contrived to touch her hand gently, again as they closed it behind them; then, rather to his discomposure, she suddenly slipped her hand confidingly into his.

"Do tell me," she urged; "I know you've got some plan up your sleeve."

She found her hand tightly imprisoned. "You are sure you want to go to India?" he asked her.

"You *know!* I've told you—it's the dream of my life."

"As a governess, or a missionary?"

"Oh, don't be so tiresome—as anything!"

"Well," he restrained himself still.

"Go on!" she cried with impatience.

"How would you like to go to India with me?"

"With *you?*"

"Yes"—he dropped his basket, snatched hers from her grasp and flung it to the ground. Now he was holding both her hands. "Yes, with me, Stella—as my wife!"

Had the old red-brick walls of the garden fallen flat around her she could hardly have felt more astounded. Involuntarily she wrenched her hands free, clasped them behind her, backed away from him.

He advanced upon her. "Now, now, little girl, what is the matter? Isn't it all quite simple? You told me yourself there was no one here you could marry, didn't you? And now here *is* someone who

wants you, who will take you to India and give you everything in the world you could wish for——"

"I'm—I'm so surprised!"

It was just what silly Ellen Carrington had said; damn it all, couldn't the child understand that she was being given the chance of her lifetime!

"Come, come—isn't it a pleasant surprise?"

She grew white, then red. "I never thought of such a thing!" she exclaimed, in agitated apology.

"Of course not, why should you? I quite understand. But it's easy enough to think of now—eh?"

Her hesitation inflamed him further; he hungered to kiss her, to hold her in his arms—the first, and as long as he lived, the last man to do so. Next moment his lips were on hers; she was enfolded, crushed to his big body, almost suffocated, and to his intense satisfaction she made no resistance. . . .

To Stella it was like all she had heard about drowning, when a multitude of impressions and memories were said to invade the mind in a miraculously short space of time: Maud Verrall and her love adventures and engagement; the spotty youth outside the Greystones gate; young Capper the farmer; the lumber room at The Chestnuts, and her thirst for India; and oddly, above all, the words of the familiar hymn that of a sudden had exasperated her those many Sundays ago seemed to beat time to the recollections:

I dare not choose my lot,
I would not if I might.

She was barely conscious of the present, hardly even of the determined embrace that held her fast; only the past seemed real, and it was the past that won. When he released her, flushed and breathless, she knew she had dared to choose her lot once and for all; she was in the grip of a wild excitement; she, Stella Carrington, was to be married, like Maud Verrall, and she was going to India, to India! The doorway of life was unlocked at last, presenting a wondrous vista, entrancing, irresistible. . . . Then, blocking the doorway, she saw Colonel Crayfield, bulky, triumphant, a masterful smile on his face.

"Well, isn't it all right?" And again he drew her to him, this time gently, protectively, and with his arm about her they sauntered among the vegetables and fruit bushes, while he held forth concerning the future, Stella hearkening as in a dream. She knew he was speaking of his position, of horses and clothes, of a piano, and a pearl necklace; but it was of India she was thinking as she hung on his arm in childlike gratitude. Was he not granting her the desire of her heart?

"You are a sort of fairy godfather!" she told him, laughing; "perhaps not exactly a *fairy*—more of a Santa Claus. I think I must call you Santa-Sahib."

"Call me what you like; but doesn't it spell Satan as well?"

"That will come in useful when you are disagreeable, cross with me."

"I shall never be cross with you, my jewel, my pet!"

Oh, it was all delightful, almost too good to be true.

But what about grandmamma? He said that grandmamma knew.

"So you have made it all right with her?" she exclaimed, with the kind of sensation that is engendered by some lucky escape. How clever of him! He was a wonder, her saviour, her deliverer. True, he was neither young nor "a picture," but one could not have everything, and Stella told herself she was going to be quite as happy as Maud Verrall, very likely far happier.

"Just fancy!" she sighed ecstatically. "And if I had only known what was coming when you found me in the larder! Isn't it a mercy that we both like onions? Do tell me, when did you think of your ripping plan?"

"The first moment I set eyes on you at the station," he declared untruthfully.

"Oh! Then *now* I know why you looked at me like that."

"Like what?"

"You did—and then under the oak tree, too! I felt there was something."

"Bright little star!" Hiding a smile, he raised her hand and kissed each pink finger-tip with deliberate enjoyment.

CHAPTER VI

"I GOT your letter," wrote Stella to Maud Verrall, "and am awfully glad about your news, though at the time it made me feel simply green with envy. How little I thought I should have some news to tell *you* when I answered it. Don't faint, but your little friend is also engaged, *and going to India!* I could turn head over heels with joy. Perhaps we shall meet next as married ladies! Wouldn't it be fun if we went out in the same ship? My fiancé is a big, tall man, much older than me; but I don't mind that a bit. There is something rather romantic, I think, in the idea of a husband a good deal older than oneself. He hasn't got a beard, and is not at all bald. I like him very much, and he spoils me frightfully. Before we sail I am to have singing lessons and learn to ride, and he says I can order what clothes I like. He is giving me a real pearl necklace. His name is Colonel Crayfield, so my initials will still be the same. Old Betty says that is unlucky, but I don't believe her; nothing could be unlucky that gets me to India. It's all like a heavenly dream, only a dream that will go on; no waking up to find myself stuck at The Chestnuts with nothing to hope for but deadliness evermore. I suppose I am an ungrateful pig. I know grandmamma and the aunts are fond of me, and of course I am fond of *them,* but I can think of nothing but

my own good luck. They don't seem altogether pleased about it; I can't imagine why, except that they never have wanted me to enjoy myself. I really believe they think it's wicked to be pleased about anything but the garden and sermons and the weather. However, I don't care. I am going to India, and nothing else matters on this earth."

So the "heavenly dream" continued, unmarred by the odd lack of sympathy displayed by grandmamma and the aunts, and, if anything, enhanced by the departure of Colonel Crayfield for London; his absence left Stella more free to indulge her fancies, to lose herself in visions, to revel, almost as though drugged, in blissful imaginings. Her betrothed sent presents and frequent letters that, though short, were fervent, and added to the glamour.

Thus time flew by, till the day of the marriage, which took place, very quietly, in the little old church. The ceremony was performed by Canon Grass in a manner, as Stella afterwards declared, that was more befitting a funeral than a wedding. She attributed his lugubrious voice and demeanour to the fact that the unfortunate gentleman was so ill-mated himself. Mrs. Grass attended the service in her invalid chair, and looked like a rag doll—poor thing, and poor Canon Grass! Grandmamma did not even have a new bonnet, and might have been a graven image. Aunt Augusta behaved as if they were all doing something wrong; and, of course, Aunt Ellen wept.

Stella thought it really very horrid of them, when

she herself was feeling so jubilant, and dear old Santa-Sahib was so nice and so kind, and looked almost "a picture" in his new clothes. He had grown a little thinner, which was a great improvement. She wore the pearl necklace, his wedding gift—it was lovely! Why did everybody but Santa-Sahib seem to wish to damp her spirits, to put a spoke in the wheel of her pleasure? Of course, there was no reception, no fuss; that she had not expected; all she would have liked, and resented not having received, was just a little sympathy with her state of joy—a little acknowledgment of her good fortune.

They drove straight from the church to the station to catch the express for London; and from then onwards "the dream" became rather more harassing than heavenly! Stella found herself in a sumptuous hotel; there was a lady's maid, a smart person engaged by Colonel Crayfield until the date of their sailing, who embarrassed her. She was confused, dismayed by revelations that, it appeared, were inseparable from matrimony, and therefore had to be accepted as a sort of toll-bar on the road to India. The weeks were packed with ceaseless activities: singing lessons, riding lessons, dressmakers, restaurants, shops, theatres.

It was actually a relief to the overtaxed bride, when they had sped across the Continent "via Brindisi," to settle down on the big P. & O. steamer, that throbbed and smelt, and was so strange, yet proved a paradise of rest and peace compared with London. There were not so many passengers—it

was early in the season—but everyone was interested in young Mrs. Crayfield; they were all very kind and friendly. Her deck-chair was always surrounded; her singing was a great success; and though Santa-Sahib was tiresome in forbidding her to dance or take part in theatricals on board ship, she had an extremely pleasant voyage.

They landed at Bombay, and oh! the rainbow-coloured crowds, the splendour, the white, shining buildings, the spicy, intoxicating warmth. It was all entrancing to Stella, oddly familiar and yet so novel. How quaint the contradictions of "The Queen of Cities," such a mixture of dignity and squalor! The best hotel was barrack-like, comfortless, not over-clean; insects dotted the walls; there were flies in myriads; doubtful food; yet at that period it was the only possible refuge for European travellers coming and going.

Santa-Sahib grumbled and scolded; but Stella said what on earth did comfort and food and cleanliness matter? Were they not *in India?* To her, all the sights and sounds, the merciless sun, the dust and the clamour, even the smells, were thrilling. Robert's head servant was there to meet them, an elderly, important-looking native; his name was Sher Singh, and he had secured an ayah for the mem-sahib, a good class Mohammedan woman who knew her work and understood a little English. Stella appreciated her quiet movements, her deft attentions, and was not overawed by "Champa" as she had been by the grand maid in London. The ayah's attitude towards the Sahib entertained her; it was

full of such humble and modest reverence. She would warn her mistress of the Sahib's approach as though for the coming of an emperor; turn aside bashfully when he entered the room, and draw her wrapper over her face. But Sher Singh! To Stella there was something vaguely sinister about the bombastic figure that held a weird, elusive reflection of his master's bearing and outline. The man seemed to watch her furtively, and though he anticipated her wishes, obeyed her least sign, she felt that beneath his diligent, obsequious care there lay a smouldering resentment.

"I'm sure Sher Singh is jealous of me," she told her husband; "he looks on me as an interloper. It's only natural, I suppose, after his long service with you as a bachelor, but it makes me uncomfortable."

"Nonsense!" he said sharply. "Sher Singh is an invaluable servant. Whatever you do, don't quarrel with him. It's all your fancy—you don't understand natives."

"Some day I shall. I mean to!"

"Well, don't begin by misunderstanding Sher Singh. I couldn't do without him."

There was a note of finality in his voice. It sounded to Stella almost as though he would prefer to part with her than with Sher Singh! She determined to banish the little rasp from her mind; after all, what did it matter? It should not interfere with her enjoyment—Sher Singh was only a servant.

They stayed long enough in Bombay to dine at the Yacht Club; to visit the caves of Elephanta, so old, so mysterious; to spend a day with an English

merchant prince, a friend of Colonel Crayfield's, in his palace on Malabar Hill. And then came the journey up-country: days and nights in the train, passing from tropical temperature to chilly dawns, first rushing through scenery grand and austere, Doré-like in its peaks and valleys, wondrous in the crimson sunset; afterwards vast yellow plains, relieved by patches of cultivation, villages, groves—mightily monotonous. Except for the time when she slept, and when they alighted at echoing stations for unpalatable meals, Stella did not cease to gaze from the windows of their compartment. The crowds on the platforms of big junctions and wayside halting-places were fascinating; the family groups, the varied clothing, the half-naked sellers of fruit and sweetmeats, the pushing, the shouting, the flurry.

It was midnight when they reached Rassih. The branch line had but lately been completed, and the railway station was little more than a short strip of unfinished platform. The station-master, a fat babu, received the travellers with elaborate civility; and, outside, a curious conveyance awaited them—like a broad, low dog-cart, hooded, drawn by a pair of white bullocks, all horns and humps and pendulous dew-laps. Stella never forgot her first transit through the slumbering city; the little caves of shops, some dimly illumined; the occasional glimpses of figures squatting muffled and shapeless, or stretched on rude bedsteads. From upper storeys floated snatches of sleepy song and the faint twang of stringed instruments. Pariah dogs nosed and snarled in the gutters. Beneath the general somnolence lay a cease-

less, subdued undercurrent of sound that seemed to mingle with stale odours of spice and rancid oil; above it all the slate-blue sky pressed low, deeply clear, besprinkled with stars.

The tonga skirted a high wall, cutting through dust so deep that its progress was hardly audible, turned in through a gateless arch, and halted before a massive, towering building. Stella, weary, yet excited, followed her husband up a steep flight of stone steps that terminated in a vast, whitewashed vestibule; there were countless doors, all open, screened with short portières. It was cold, gloomy, dim. None of the lamps that hung on the walls had been turned up; the silence was oppressive, cheerless.

Robert, muttering angrily, strode ahead and stumbled over a form that lay swathed, corpse-like, in one of the doorways. A scene ensued that to Stella was horrifying. The corpse-like figure sprang up with a wild yell of alarm, and was cuffed and abused by the Sahib. The noise brought a scampering of bare feet and a swarm of people, hastily binding on turbans, adjusting garments. It appeared that the servants had all been asleep, that preparations for the Sahib's arrival were not even begun. The air shook with the wrath of the Sahib; he would listen to no explanations; the offenders ran hither and thither; there was confusion, consternation.

Stella stood by, silent, trembling; she was appalled by her husband's exhibition of rage; he might murder one of these defenceless people; it seemed even possible that at any moment he might turn upon her, and kick and beat and abuse her also! What

a ghastly arrival! . . . Then all at once there was peace. Sher Singh had arrived with the luggage, and in no time refreshments were on the table; the dining-room, big as a ballroom, blazed with light; the Sahib's fury subsided.

To Stella's astonishment the servants conducted themselves as if nothing extraordinary had happened, and all went well. Robert made no excuse or apology for his anger; apparently he was unconscious of having behaved, as it seemed to her, like a madman. He ate and drank with complacence, asking questions quite amiably at intervals of the rotund attendant who was evidently chief of the table staff; while Stella, unable for very fatigue to swallow food, sipped her tea and looked about her with dazed interest. . . . What high walls, washed a pale brick colour; how bare the great room, just a big table and clumsy wooden chairs with arms and cane seats. On the floor was a sort of thick drugget; it felt hard beneath her feet. A wood fire had been lighted in a wide open grate; it smelt fragrant, comforting. . . . Stella's eyes drooped; the white-clad figures of the servants grew blurred to her vision; Robert himself, still eating heartily, seemed to recede in a mist. Then suddenly there arose, from somewhere outside, a succession of blood-curdling yells, and she started, wide awake, laid hold of Robert's arm. "Oh, what is it?" she cried in alarm. "Someone is being killed!"

He laughed and patted her hand reassuringly. "It's only hyenas and jackals," he told her; "you'll hear it every night—soon get used to it."

Hyenas and jackals! Wild beasts she would have gazed at in a zoo with wondering interest were here, close by, and no more to be heeded than if they had been stray dogs! She remembered that this was India; the weird noise fired her fancy, and mingled with her dreams that night.

She awoke next morning to a very different sound, the cooing of doves; bright, hard sunlight streamed through the long door-windows. She found she had slept late; Champa, bringing tea, said the Sahib had already gone out, had left orders that the memsahib was not to be disturbed. Then she bathed—in a bathroom that resembled a prison cell; the tub was of zinc, and there was a row of red earthenware vessels for the cold water. Stella thought them very artistic; how Mrs. Daw would love to paint on them, paint storks and sprays of apple-blossom, and fill them with dried bulrushes—the very thing for a bazaar! . . . But there was nothing that could by any possibility be considered artistic about the bedroom: the beds were just wooden frames, not even enamelled or painted; two enormous cupboards stood against the walls; the fireplace was a cavern; the dressing-table was more suited to a kitchen; and there were a few clumsy chairs matching those of the dining-room. It was with a slight feeling of desolation that she began to explore the house; in the drawing-room was a certain amount of wicker furniture, with loose cretonne covers of an ugly pattern, a pair of handsome screens, and two or three richly carved tables; the dining-room she avoided, having caught sight of

servants laying the table; she felt shy of encountering them. She peeped into other rooms, all of them equally bare and enormous, comfortless—even the one she supposed must be Robert's study, since it had a business-like table in the centre, covered with papers.

And yet there was something exhilarating in the airiness, in the sense of space, the hard brilliance of the sunshine outside, the unfamiliar scents and sounds that seemed to float everywhere. Her spirits rose as she wandered out on to a balcony almost wide enough for a dog-cart, and gazed over a limitless landscape studded with low bushes, and in the foreground a few ruins of what might have been mosques or dwellings or tombs. The flat country, stretching for miles to the dusty horizon, was impressive in its very persistence and sameness, that was without relief, save for here and there a pillar of dust that swirled upwards, waltzing madly for a moment as though demon-possessed. Then she watched a more steady dust-cloud, of a different form, that was wending its way slowly among the clumps of scrub and stunted bushes; and presently there came into view a string of camels led by a great beast hung with gaudy trappings, ridden by a figure swathed in white garments, heavily turbaned. On they came, a silent, stately procession, moving as though to the rhythm of a funeral march, men striding beside them in flowing garments or seated between the great bales slung on either side of the camels' humps. One or two baby camels shambled along by their mothers—awkward, woolly creatures, the size of colts, with legs that appeared too long for their bodies.

Fascinated, Stella watched the cavalcade till it vanished in a cloud of dust; then she walked to the end of the balcony and looked over the parapet, down a drop that made her feel giddy. There was nothing below but heaps of rough stones and bricks, coarse grass, and thorn trees. Again she glanced over the waterless waste, burning drab and drear in the hot sunshine, and suddenly she thought of the Common at home, of the green turf, the gorse and the bracken, the blue distances; she wondered what grandmamma and the aunts were doing at that moment; she remembered the smooth lawn and the cedar tree, the little stream. . . . The unwelcome pang of home-sickness was discomforting, but it did not last long. As she turned away the realisation that she was in India, that the life she so desired had begun, came back to her forcibly; and soon she was finding pleasure in the garden, in watching the pair of small white bullocks that drew water from a well in a big leather bucket like a gigantic sponge-bag; in strolling among the shrubs that flamed with blossom, scarlet, yellow, pink. There was an orange grove, too, with real fruit on the trees gleaming golden among glossy foliage. Flights of green parrots flew screaming above her head; gay-crested little birds hopped and scuffled in the dust at her feet; small grey squirrels scampered in every direction. Was there anything at The Chestnuts to compare with it all?

Santa-Sahib was in good humour when he returned. They had a wonderful breakfast at midday: a curry of chicken, with snowy rice boiled to

perfection and served separately, not as a border round some réchauffé, which was old Betty's conception of a curry. Other dishes were numerous, and fruit was in abundance—oranges, custard apples, loquats; also delicious little scones. Afterwards Robert took her into the drawing-room, and told her she could spend what she liked on it; said he had ordered a piano from Calcutta; it ought to arrive in a day or two now. He was sure she would wish to have pretty chintz, and silk cushions, and new curtains. When she asked him if it would not all cost too much money, he laughed and kissed her, called her his baby. Sher Singh was summoned, and was bidden to send for a silk merchant from the bazaar, and to engage a "durzey"—a male person whose duty it would be to sit in the veranda all day and make curtains and cushions and chair covers, and anything else the memsahib might desire. Stella felt like a princess in a fairy tale.

During the next few days the ladies of the station called on the Commissioner's bride. Mrs. Cuthell, wife of the Deputy Commissioner, came first; she was a homely human being, anxious to be kind; but her good-natured intentions were leavened by a natural resentment that her husband's superior in the service should have married anyone so junior in years to herself. She said she hoped Mrs. Crayfield would not find her position too difficult; of course, she would have much to learn.

"Hitherto," she remarked, "I have been the principal lady!" She forced a smile. "Now I shall be obliged to take a back seat! We were all so sur-

prised when we heard that Colonel Crayfield was bringing out a wife. We had looked on him as a confirmed bachelor. Certainly we did not expect a wife as youthful as yourself!"

"It's a fault I shall grow out of, perhaps," pleaded Stella meekly; and afterwards Mrs. Cuthell told Mrs. Piggott, the police officer's wife, that she thought the new bride was rather a cheeky chit. Mrs. Piggott made haste to ascertain the truth of this opinion for herself. Stella found her a more entertaining visitor than Mrs. Cuthell, though perhaps less likeable; Mrs. Cuthell, she felt, meant to be motherly, whereas Mrs. Piggott, who also seemed quite middle-aged to Stella, assumed the attitude of a contemporary. She had sharp eyes, a sharp tongue, and endless stories to tell of the other folk in the station; how the Paynes (Post Office) brought up their children so badly, talked nothing but Hindustani to them; what a lot of money the Taylors (Canals) wasted, getting their stores from Bombay, and things out from home —if they ever paid for them at all! And *had* Mrs. Crayfield seen the Antonios—Dr. Antonio and his wife and daughter? Old Antonio had been an apothecary at the time of the Mutiny, and had somehow hung on to the position of Civil Surgeon ever since—he had been years and years at Rassih; the Government was only too glad to leave him there, regardless of the feelings of the rest of the station. Why, they were practically natives! And it was believed they smoked hookahs—certainly their house smelt like it. Pussy, the daughter (no chicken), had been doing her best to marry young Smithson,

the Taylors' assistant; but she, Mrs. Piggott, had warned the young man, with the result that just as the Antonios were expecting him to propose every moment, he had fled into camp. If only the Antonios could know! They would never speak to her again.

"And no great loss," added Mrs. Piggott, "except that in such a small station it's a pity to have rows. Then there are the Fosters (railway people); they are inclined to give themselves airs because they have a little money of their own, which is unusual in India. But you will see them all for yourself, my dear. Of course, you will come to the Club? We all play tennis there every evening, and have tea and pegs, and look at the English papers."

"I suppose so," said Stella doubtfully; "but my husband hasn't said anything about it."

"You must cure him of his dull habits. Hitherto he has only had some of the men to play tennis with him on his own courts, which, of course, are first-rate, but it's rather unsociable of him. He must not expect *you* to hold yourself aloof from the rest of us. Now if he won't bring you himself to the Club just let me know, and I can always pick you up on my way."

Mrs. Piggott saw herself envied by the station as young Mrs. Crayfield's bosom friend. She took the first opportunity of telling Mrs. Cuthell, whom she detested, that Mrs. Crayfield had been perfectly sweet to *her* when she called, had asked her advice on all kinds of points, and had taken her into her bedroom to show her the trousseau and the jewellery, etc.—

all of which, by the way, was untrue; but Mrs. Piggott considered the falsehoods worth while, since it annoyed Mrs. Cuthell and made her jealous.

Stella thought she would like to belong to the Club; but, to her surprise, when Robert came to the drawing-room for tea, and she mentioned the subject, he said he did not wish her to "make herself cheap"; he disapproved of the Club gatherings—a lot of gossiping women and silly young men. Once a week—whichever day she liked to select—she could be "At Home" to the whole station. Their own tennis courts were in excellent order, and there was no occasion to become intimate with anyone.

"You will return their calls, of course," he continued, "and we must give a couple of dinner parties, and there will be your weekly reception. That will be quite enough. Now go and get on your habit and we'll have a ride."

Stella obeyed, feeling rather crestfallen. The programme sounded dull. Was she never to make any friends? And what was Robert's objection to all these people? Surely she and Robert were not so superior themselves as to warrant such splendid isolation! However, for the moment she made no protest; the recollection of her husband's violence on the night of their arrival was still with her; she feared to provoke him. But there would seem to be drawbacks to the position of "chief lady of the station," according to Robert's idea of its fulfilment!

She forgot her vexation in the delight of mounting the handsome chestnut mare that was to be her own property, and in the softening sunshine they

skirted the high wall of the city and trotted along the unmetalled footway of the main road beneath splendid trees planted at equal distances apart. They passed a few compounds with thatched bungalows standing well back from the dusty road; these dwellings looked humble in comparison with the palace on the old fort walls that commanded the huddled bazaar and the scattered European habitations beyond. They met native vehicles packed with passengers; and riders of miserable ponies dismounted, making obeisance, as the Commissioner Sahib went by; low narrow carts, crowded with women and children and merchandise, creaked along lazily in the middle of the road.

Then they turned from this main thoroughfare and galloped along a broad, grass-grown canal bank, flanked on one side with luxuriant plantations; on the other, dull green water flowed steadily, silently, bearing life to the villages and crops below. Crossing a bridge, they rode to a village where Colonel Crayfield wished to make some inquiries connected with his administration; and Stella watched, keenly interested, while the headman, a patriarch with a long, henna-dyed beard, hurried forth to make his report, followed by a rabble of peasants who gathered at a respectful distance to gape at the spectacle of an Englishwoman on horseback. Now and then a naked child would run boldly into the open, only to be hauled back shrieking by relations whose reproaches were as piercing as the culprit's lamentations.

The memsahib gazed at it all, absorbed; she

was sorry when her husband raised his whip to his hat in farewell salutation to the headman, and they turned their backs on the village and the eager, excited little crowd. Their return was by a different route, which, to Stella's secret interest, took them past the Club gardens. Tennis was in progress, and the spectators were seated in chairs collected around a refreshment table. Every head was turned in the direction of the riders; the Club members seemed as eager to behold the lady on horseback as had been the villagers. It was pleasing to Stella to find herself the object of so much human curiosity.

CHAPTER VII

It was the day of Mrs. Crayfield's first garden party. What struck Stella as an extraordinary form of invitation had gone forth by hand: a notice, with "Mrs. Crayfield at Home," and the chosen date, inscribed in large copper-plate by a clerk in the Commissioner's office. Below was written, "Please write seen," and then came a column of names, the whole of the visitable community of Rassih. This document came back duly initialled by all but one or two inaccessible bachelors who were out in the district on duty. Stella expressed a nervous hope that everyone would come, and inquired what preparations she ought to make.

"Trust them to come!" scoffed Robert. "And don't worry yourself about preparations. The servants know what to do."

And, indeed, the servants' capabilities seemed miraculous. Tennis nets were fixed, the courts marked out correctly; tables became covered with cakes and sandwiches, tea and coffee, spirits and liqueurs, multitudes of soda-water bottles; there was fresh lemonade and claret-cup. All far more imposing than even the yearly flower-show at the vicarage at home that was patronised by the whole county! Stella felt there ought to be a band in attendance as well. She dressed herself in a soft white gown, and a lace hat that had cost Santa-Sahib a fabulous sum

in London; then she stood for a few moments on the raised plinth overlooking the garden to watch Sher Singh giving orders and directions on the tennis ground below. Nothing had been forgotten; the row of cane chairs had little strips of carpet in front of them, and a group of small native boys clothed in white, with red caps and red belts, stood ready till they should be wanted to retrieve the balls. And all this was to happen every week!

Santa-Sahib came out and stood beside her, bulky, cheerful, in clean flannels, smoking a long cheroot.

"Turn round, little girl," he commanded; "let's have a look at you."

She turned and bobbed him a curtsey; he regarded her from head to foot with a proprietary air of satisfaction, yet he was silent, and Stella inquired anxiously if she "would do."

"Just as well, perhaps, that we're not in a big station," he exclaimed, half laughing, half serious, "or it would take me all my time to look after you!"

"But shall we be here always?" she asked.

"The longer the better," he answered shortly. "And no careering off to the hills, mind, unless of course——"

"Unless what? Do tell me!"

"Unless your health makes it necessary."

"My health? But I'm as strong as a horse. What do you mean?"

"What I say, my good child. Thank goodness you *are* a fine healthy young woman, and that old Antonio's strong point is maternity cases!"

The blood flew to her face, and down again to her toes; such a possibility, at which she now understood he was hinting, had never presented itself to her mind. She felt horrified, frightened, as though caught in a trap. Did Robert expect it of her? How cruel of him to talk like this just when she was so content and lighthearted, looking forward to her garden party, to everything in the future. A baby! She knew nothing about children, and if she did have a child it would, she felt sure, be exactly like Santa-Sahib—plain, and solid, and red. Why on earth couldn't one be married without all that sort of thing!

She heard Robert say: "Why, what's the matter?" and she looked up to find his small, hard eyes fixed on her with a quizzical expression that disturbed her still further.

"Nothing," she replied uneasily, turning from him to hide her distress. "Look, there's somebody arriving. Hadn't we better go down?"

"It's Beard, the missionary, and his wife, and I'm hanged if they haven't brought their family with them!"

An odd little party was scrambling from an antiquated pony carriage. Mr. Beard, in a long black coat, white trousers, and a pith hat shaped like a half of a football; Mrs. Beard, in a voluminous gown of some green material; and three little girls, who all wore sun-hats as well—hats so large that they appeared to rest on the children's shoulders.

Stella hastened down the steps in front of her husband, to greet the guests who were now arriving

in force. To her relief, Mrs. Cuthell, so to speak, took command, and proceeded to make up the sets for tennis, explaining that *she* knew how everyone played, which, of course, Mrs. Crayfield could not; and soon the courts were filled with vigorous people, running and shouting; tennis balls flew, the little boys darted after them, non-players gathered in knots about the tables, or settled in the easy chairs, and it was all very pleasant and cheerful. Stella, feeling excited and important, set herself to do duty as hostess. She conversed with Mrs. Beard, and duly admired the three little girls who hung round their mother; two were twins; the third was only a year younger, which accounted for their all looking about the same age and size. Mrs. Beard said that the number of native Christians in the Rassih district was on the increase; she hoped Mrs. Crayfield would visit the school and distribute prizes. . . . Stella then listened to Mrs. Antonio's artless admiration of her daughter "Pussy," who played tennis well, and was certainly a handsome creature with rich colouring and brilliant dark eyes. Why Mrs. Piggott should have branded the Antonios as "practically natives" Stella could not quite understand, though they seemed different, it was true, from the rest of the official community, and they spoke with a curious accent. Dr. Antonio was a stumpy, good-humoured person, with a large stomach about which he had bandaged a crimson silk sash; he had long, straggling whiskers, obviously dyed, and a dark, puffy face. Mrs. Antonio was sallow and thin, and had regular features inherited by her daughter,

whom she adored with the frankest extravagance. She was drawing Mrs. Crayfield's attention to Pussy's perfect complexion, when Mrs. Piggott joined the group, and remarked pointedly that Mrs. Foster's sister, who was playing tennis in the same set with Pussy, was to be envied her lovely white skin, fair hair, and blue eyes.

"But how pastee!" objected Mrs. Antonio. "She had a nice colour in her cheeks when she came out last year from home; now it is all gone, while my Pussy she is like a rose."

"Well, you see," said Mrs. Piggott, with the air of a kindly instructress, "Pussy is accustomed to the climate; you must remember that she has never been to England!"

Stella glanced nervously at Mrs. Antonio, but Pussy's mother merely nodded complacently and turned to her hostess. "My Pussy, she is so healthy and strong. It is luckee, for this is a very hot place, Mrs. Crayfield."

"So I understand," returned Stella politely; and then Mrs. Antonio began to talk about punkah coolies and their perversities during the hot season, and alluded to something called "tatties." Mrs. Piggott bemoaned the difficulty of procuring ice when it was most needed. Mrs. Beard said, with self-righteous resentment, that *Mission people* had to endure the heat without such alleviations; and Mrs. Antonio confessed that ice gave her "pain at stomach," but that Pussy liked to suck lumps, which was bad for her prettee teeth.

During this dull conversation among their elders

the Beard children took courage and wandered afield; they made for a big mango tree, behind which they appeared to find some attraction.

As each set of tennis came to an end the players gathered about the refreshment tables; trays were handed round by the white-clad servants under the authoritative supervision of Sher Singh, and suddenly Mrs. Antonio transferred her attention from Pussy to Colonel Crayfield's bearer.

"That man! How does he behave to you, Mrs. Crayfield, dear?" she inquired with genuine, if inquisitive, solicitude.

Stella resented the question, conscious as she was of her subordination to the rule of Sher Singh. She felt sensitively suspicious that the little gang of ladies were one and all aware of her humiliating position.

"He seems to be a very good servant," she replied evasively, "and he is devoted to my husband."

Mrs. Cuthell joined in. "Oh, yes, and Colonel Crayfield to him; everyone knows that! But all the same, bachelors' old servants are invariably antagonistic to a mistress. It's a mistake to keep them. When you have learnt something about Indian housekeeping you will find out how he has been feathering his nest all these years!"

It was Mrs. Piggott's turn next. "How well I remember the bother I had with my husband's old khansamah when first we were married. He used to commit endless atrocities, and then declare he had only obeyed my orders. Edward always believed him! However, I soon put my foot down and got rid of him. There was such a row!"

"I go to the bazaar myself," said Mrs. Beard somewhat irrelevantly, "and do my own marketing."

"Ah! but of course *your* servants are Christians," argued Mrs. Piggott, covert contempt in her tone, "and we all know what that means!"

Mrs. Beard reddened. "Which shows how lamentably ignorant you all are," she retorted. "You think that because a native is a Christian that he must be a rogue. I admit that he generally is a rogue to start with, but not because he is a Christian. It is because, unfortunately, our converts are mostly drawn from a class that has nothing to lose by embracing the true religion, people who are outcasts by birth, cut off from all spiritual advantages, oppressed and despised, jungle folk, gypsies, many of them thieves by profession, and such like. So far we have hardly tapped the better born classes, and whenever we do it is a real triumph, for they have everything to lose from a worldly point of view. But we know we must begin from the bottom and work upwards, and already great progress has been made, though it is necessarily slow, and the fight is often disheartening. . . ."

Stella looked at the faded, dowdy little woman with a new interest. Mrs. Beard and her husband were working for India, doing great work, just as great in its way as the Carringtons had done in the past, and as their kind were doing in the present. She wished she could help the Beards by engaging a whole staff of Christian converts as servants! But so far she was powerless, there was nothing she could do; and as the atmosphere had become slightly

uncomfortable she was about to try and change the subject when, to her relief, a diversion was caused by Mrs. Beard's discovery that her offspring were disporting themselves behind the mango tree with some native children, though, surely, according to Mission theories, Mrs. Beard should have felt no displeasure?

"Martha, Mary, Deborah!" she called sternly, "come here at once!"

This summons was not obeyed, but apparently it caused an animated argument between the padre's children and their Oriental playmates. Again Mrs. Beard raised a voice of command, and presently Martha and Mary and Deborah emerged from the shelter of the tree, escorting a small brown boy attired in a red cotton garment and an embroidered skull cap.

"Mother," shouted the three little girls in chorus, "this dear boy wants to come to our school. We will make him a Christian, mayn't we?"

To their mortified astonishment this praiseworthy plan did not meet with the encouragement it deserved. The Commissioner's head servant pounced on the red-coated pagan and took him, howling loudly, from his friends.

Stella rose. "Sher Singh!" she called angrily, "let the child alone!" Of course, the man heard her order, must have known, though perforce she had spoken in English, what she wished him to do; but he paid no attention, just bore the child, kicking and screaming, towards the servants' quarters.

Martha and Mary and Deborah ran to their mother

and buried their faces in her skirt. Stella looked round for Robert; he was drinking a whisky and soda, regardless of the scene. Mrs. Cuthell laid a restraining hand on her arm. "It's quite right, Mrs. Crayfield," she said with reassuring inflection. "The servants' children must be kept in the background, otherwise they would swarm all over the place."

But Stella felt she had been publicly flouted by Sher Singh, and though for the moment she was helpless, she resolved to tell Robert, when the party should be over, that for the future she expected Sher Singh to obey her. Meantime, while Mrs. Cuthell made up fresh sets of tennis, she apologised prettily to Mrs. Beard.

But when the guests had all departed, with many gratifying assurances of their enjoyment, her courage dwindled. Since the night of her arrival at Rassih she had dreaded Robert's anger; the unpleasant memory remained with her so vividly—the uproar, the helpless alarm of the servants, her own fear and dismay. Never before in the whole course of her sheltered existence had she seen anyone so angry. And now, were she to protest against Sher Singh's behaviour, what if he should rage at her in the same manner? As he passed into his dressing-room she recognised, with a sinking at her heart, that she was afraid of her husband, abjectly afraid, ten thousand times more afraid of him then she had ever been of grandmamma. She dared not risk a scene, dared not stand up for herself. She would let the matter rest for the present, wait till Sher Singh dis-

obeyed her again. After all, perhaps the man had not heard, or had not understood her this afternoon.

However, towards the end of dinner she happened to look up and catch Sher Singh regarding her with an expression of such venomous hatred that she barely checked an exclamation. Meeting her astonished gaze, he turned away abruptly to the sideboard, and she drew in her breath, shivering. When, a little later, he was pouring port into Robert's glass, she observed that his hand shook, that his eyes were heavy and bloodshot; there was something strange in his appearance.

She tried to dismiss the incident from her mind, turned her thoughts to some advice Mrs. Beard had given her as to studying Hindustani. At least she might dare to attack Robert on that point. It was like being a deaf person not to understand the words spoken around one. And once she had obtained some command of the language she would be in a position to give her own orders to the other servants without Sher Singh's intervention.

She waited until they were in the drawing-room, and Robert had flung himself into an easy chair to examine some official document. He worked very hard, and seemed to think of little else.

"Robert," she began softly. He did not hear her. She repeated his name and he looked up abstractedly. Then he lowered the sheets of foolscap and removed his pince-nez.

"What is it now?" he inquired with indulgent resignation.

"Can I have lessons in Hindustani?"

"Why? What good would that do you?"

"I want to learn, and I have nothing particular to do while you are at work all day."

"You've got the piano, and you can order what books you want from Bombay. Haven't you any fancy work?"

She laughed. "Fancy work! I want to use my brains."

"Don't talk nonsense. What good will Hindustani do your brains? Keep up your French and music. Natives respect Englishwomen far more if they can't speak the language."

"Oh, Robert, what a thing to say! I'm sure that can't be true."

"You know nothing about it, you silly child. Come here!"

She had risen and was moving restlessly about the room. As she passed he put out his arm and pulled her down on to his knees. With a strong effort she controlled her reluctance, realising, suddenly aghast, that her distaste for Robert's demonstrations of affection was on the increase, that it threatened to develop into actual aversion. As he pressed her face against his shoulder, kissing her hair, a sort of desperation seized her. She did not love Robert, had never loved him, and at this moment she almost hated him. The question rose in her mind: Was it because they had known she was not in love with Robert that grandmamma and the aunts had shown so little sympathy with her marriage, had behaved as if she were doing something reprehen-

sible? If so, why had they not warned her? Yet, supposing they had gone so far as to put probable consequences before her, would she have heeded, believed them? No, she knew well enough that in her headstrong simplicity nothing would then have turned her from her purpose. If anyone was to blame in the matter it was Robert, who had married her to please himself only, regardless of her ignorance of life and love, even partly, perhaps, because of it. She recalled a sentence in the letter Maud Verrall had written announcing her engagement: "I am very happy and awfully in love." If only she was in love with Robert! But she was not, she never could be. Did he know it? Not that she believed he would care one way or the other as long as she submitted to his will in every detail. But at least she did not intend to submit with regard to learning Hindustani. More than ever did she feel that congenial occupation of mind was a necessity, that if she could not satisfy her craving for knowledge of the country she would rather have stayed on at The Chestnuts. How could she hope to understand India, as far as it was possible for an Englishwoman to do so, till she was able to talk to the people? She had already discovered that India for its own sake did not interest Robert. He worked hard because he liked work. He had a clear, hard brain; the mode of existence suited him; he appreciated his big pay and the importance of his position; natives were afraid of him, and he liked to inspire fear. He never talked to her of his work, or of the people and their histories and religions, and now

he did not want her to learn the language, beyond the smattering that would suffice for her daily requirements.

However, learn it she would. And a means, though repugnant, of gaining her ends occurred to her. Bracing her will, she slipped her arm about his neck and laid her lips to his cheek. "You are *Satan* Sahib now," she murmured plaintively. "I don't like you at all."

His grasp of her tightened. "Why, what have I done?"

"The first little thing I have ever asked for you refuse me!"

"What was it?"

Good heavens! Were her wishes so trivial to him that they could pass from his mind on the spot?

She answered his question without betrayal of her resentment. "That I should learn Hindustani properly."

"What a little pest! Well, if I say 'yes,' how much will you love Santa-Sahib?"

"Ever and ever so much," she cooed, knowing that half measures would be useless, that she must pay, and pay fully, for what she wanted.

"All right, then we must see about a respectable old *munshi,* who won't let you work too hard or teach you bad words. After all, if you must use what you call your brains, it may be better for you than French novels. But remember, if you're going to pose as a clever woman I'll divorce you at once!"

"I don't think you'll get rid of me quite so easily," she laughed. The victory elated her. In future she would have no scruple as to this method of conquest when the object she desired was worth it. So she sipped her first taste of the power of sex hypocrisy, scented the supreme value of feminine arts and wiles.

CHAPTER VIII

Stella was careful to conceal from Robert the pleasure she found in her lessons with the white-bearded, horn-spectacled patriarch appointed her tutor. Having attained her desire through guile, she did not intend to risk deprivation through candour. Now and then, as a precaution, she would allude jokingly to her studies, sometimes feigned to be weary of them, implying that only a determination not to be baffled by a self-imposed task caused her to persevere; and Robert, who regarded the matter as a whim that would pass, made no further obstruction. During the hours while he was safely at office she worked zealously, and the progress she made surprised her, unconscious as she was of her own mental ability. Soon she could carry on simple conversations with the old teacher, and she forbade Champa to speak to her in English, greatly to the disgust of that accomplished female, who feared that her prestige in the compound as interpreter to the memsahib might suffer.

Champa sulked, and in some mysterious fashion seemed to join forces with Sher Singh in creating an atmosphere of espionage that to Stella was intensely exasperating. Did she give an order on her own account, it was caught up at once and repeated elaborately by the ayah; if she wandered in the garden Sher Singh would follow, and when she made objec-

tions both servants professed to misunderstand what she said. She felt she was being harried, and was unable to discover the reason. Never could she succeed in exploring the servants' quarters, for Sher Singh was always at hand; and as Robert had bidden her keep away from the low line of dwellings that swarmed with people, like a species of human ant-heap, disobedience might be reported by Sher Singh to his master either with or without intentional spite. Sometimes Mrs. Cuthell came to see her, also Mrs. Piggott and Mrs. Antonio, and during their visits Champa lurked and peeped, or Sher Singh hung about the doorways.

These ladies invited Mrs. Crayfield informally to tea or to tiffin, but Robert discouraged acceptance, said it was better not to start intimacies, as if he were jealous of her possible friendships; and although no real sacrifice was entailed, Stella made capital out of her refusals—pretended she was foregoing a pleasure for the sole reason that she wished to follow Santa-Sahib's will. She told herself she was growing sinfully deceitful; but her apprehension lest her study of the language should be stopped if she opposed Robert's prejudices in any other direction was stronger than her conscience. Anything to keep him amiable. Sometimes she wondered if she had any conscience left. Therefore Crayfield remained complacently convinced of his young wife's devotion. She gave him no trouble, was apparently content to leave the household control to Sher Singh, always looked lovely and fresh and sweet-tempered, and he desired no more. Wit and wisdom, intelligent con-

versation on her part would merely have bored him, rendered him vaguely suspicious. In his opinion women were better without education, which, all the same, was not to be confounded with what he regarded as "accomplishments." He liked her to sing pretty ballads and play waltzes; he enjoyed singing to her sympathetic accompaniment; and when she attempted to paint flowers and kingfishers and storks, or embroider strips of "crash" with intricate patterns in coloured cottons, on the lines of Mrs. Daw's remembered achievements, he criticised the results with patronising encouragement.

Thus the days passed smoothly. Rides in the late afternoon, a few formal dinners to "the station," the weekly "at homes," music in the evenings, until, shortly before Christmas, they went into camp on a tour of inspection. This meant double sets of tents, quantities of folding furniture, camels and carts and followers innumerable; it was a kind of royal progress. They passed from district to district, joining camps with various officials who came within the Commissioner's jurisdiction, friendly people to be entertained by their chief, entertaining him and his pretty wife in return. Stella revelled in the long marches on horseback, in the brilliant "cold weather," the small game shooting parties in the evenings when work was over, and the ever interesting background of villages, crops and cattle. She felt that such compensations made it worth while to be Santa-Sahib's plaything, especially as her lessons could be continued with the old *munshi,* who had somehow provided himself with a tent like a candle extinguisher

and a small cow-hocked pony at Government expense. From him Stella gathered much local lore, curious stories of native village life. He expounded to her the system of self-government, old as the East. She caught glimpses of an ingrained faith in the power of spells and charms that all went back to the worship of Nature, though their origins had long been lost sight of, obscured by time.

It was with genuine regret that she returned to the station to "settle down," according to Robert, for the hot weather months. Rassih looked dusty and drear after the groves and cultivation of the district, the house felt more vast and oppressive, the outlook over the desert was one endless yellow haze. Preparations proceeded for the fierce heat that was at hand. Punkahs were hung from the ceilings, clumsy machines called "thermantidotes" made their appearance for the purpose of pumping cooled air into the rooms when the moment should arrive, screens of sweet-scented grass lay piled in the verandas, to be erected in the doorways and kept damp when the west wind should sweep and swirl over the land by day, and often by night as well.

The only change that threatened the social community was the coming departure of the Cuthells. The transfer took place shortly after the Crayfields' return to the station, and Mrs. Cuthell paid her farewell respects to the Commissioner's wife bursting with satisfaction, her broad face one beam of rejoicing and excitement.

"I can't describe to you how thankful we are to be leaving this dreadful place, Mrs. Crayfield,

especially just as the hot weather is beginning. Only wait till it is in full blast, my dear, and then won't you wish you were out of it too! Rassih is one of the hottest stations in India, and this house, for all its height and space, can be a veritable oven. It's such luck that we are going to the hills on duty. You must ask your husband to let you come up to us for a visit. You will lose your bright complexion and good spirits, and get fever and prickly heat and all the rest of it if you stay here too long."

"It is very kind of you," rejoined Stella, unperturbed by these awful forebodings, "but I'm really rather looking forward to the experience."

Mrs. Cuthell glanced round the great drawing-room, that certainly of late had undergone much improvement, but all the same she gave a little shudder.

"Well, of course you can but try it," she croaked; "but in addition to definite drawbacks, I always feel that this house is so creepy. I suppose on account of its history—all those poor women and children being murdered here at the time of the mutiny. It seems so horrible to think of the officers cut down on parade, and then their families hiding here on the roof. They say the mutineers did not think of looking for them on the roof, and were just leaving the compound when one woman peeped over the parapet and they saw her. Of course, it was all up with the poor creatures; they were dragged down and murdered. It is difficult to realise that it all happened less than forty years ago."

She paused abruptly at the sight of Stella's white

face and horror-stricken eyes. "Oh, didn't you know?" she inquired with remorse. "I'm so sorry I spoke of it, but I never dreamt——"

Stella gulped down her horror, but for the moment all her enthusiasm for India turned to revulsion. That dark page of history had hitherto seemed so remote, so unreal, like some tragedy of the Middle Ages long since forgotten and forgiven. Now the fact of its comparative recency, the vision of those defenceless women and children dragged down from the actual roof that was above her head, to be butchered without mercy in these very rooms, affected her acutely. How could she exist month after month in a dwelling that must be saturated with such agonising memories?

"Now, if anyone tells you that extraordinary noises are sometimes heard during the hot weather," continued Mrs. Cuthell with the best intentions, "don't take any notice. I have never believed in ghosts myself, and probably if there *are* noises they come from the underground ruins—falling of masonry, and so on."

"The underground ruins!" repeated Stella. What was she to hear next?

"Yes. You know, one of the old Moghul emperors—I forget his name—was supposed to have dug himself a subterranean living-place, because he was blind—ophthalmia, no doubt, like so many natives. Anyway, all underneath the house and compound there are said to be tunnels and chambers, and an oil tank and treasure, and goodness knows what. The emperor went to war with some neigh-

bouring enemy and got killed, so that he and his followers never came back, and what they left underground nobody knows."

"And has nobody ever tried to find out?" asked Stella, her curiosity aflame.

"I believe your husband's predecessor in the appointment got leave to dig. He used the prisoners from the jail, but so many accidents happened—men fell into holes and broke their limbs, or died from the bad air, and were bitten by snakes, and in the middle of it all the Commissioner went mad and committed suicide by jumping over the parapet at the back of the house. Of course, the natives said the digging had brought bad luck——" Again Mrs. Cuthell feared she had been indiscreet. "But you mustn't think of these things," she added cheerfully. "There is hardly an old house in India that hasn't some unpleasant story, and I'm sure you are far too sensible to let your mind dwell on anything that may have happened in the past."

It had been far from Mrs. Cuthell's intention to leave a legacy of apprehension and disquietude to the Commissioner's young wife, though she had never quite forgiven the usurpation of her throne as chief memsahib of the station by one so much her junior. With all her shallow outlook, Mrs. Cuthell owned a well-meaning disposition, and now she sincerely regretted that in her selfish elation and glee she should have alarmed and depressed the poor girl, however unwittingly, as she could not fail to perceive had been the result of her chatter.

"Now do remember," she said with an affection-

ately repentant farewell, "if you find you can't stand the heat you have only to write and say you are coming to us, and we shall be truly delighted to put you up for as long as you like. I mean it."

Stella murmured her gratitude. She divined Mrs. Cuthell's self-reproach, and realised the wisdom of her advice not to allow her mind to dwell on the information so thoughtlessly imparted. After all, if Mrs. Cuthell had not divulged the history of the house, someone else would have done so sooner or later; it was only a wonder she had not heard it all before now. She freely forgave Mrs. Cuthell, and was sorry to see the last of her. Had Robert allowed her to make a friend she would have chosen Mrs. Cuthell, who at least was simple and true. Stella did not trust Mrs. Piggott. Mrs. Antonio and Pussy were out of the question as intimates. She had nothing in common with Mrs. Beard, and she had seen little of the other ladies. None of them had made friendly advances beyond their first calls, and a self-interested attendance at Mrs. Crayfield's weekly "at homes," when they were assured of good tennis and refreshments and an enjoyable afternoon.

Nevertheless, Stella had Mrs. Cuthell to thank for a sleepless night, that was followed at intervals by many others. She lay awake visualising horrors, listening with dread for "extraordinary sounds," though she heard nothing more startling than the usual chorus of jackals and hyenas outside, the snores of a servant in one of the verandas, and the coughing and murmuring of the night guard. She made no confession of her fears to Robert. For one thing

she suspected that his silence concerning the stories and associations of the place had been due not so much to consideration for her peace of mind as for his own convenience, and she could well understand his motive. A wife with "nerves," despondent, anxious to escape, would not be at all to his taste. But her efforts to conceal her apprehensions and her antipathy to the house only added to the strain.

CHAPTER IX

The Cuthells' successor was reported to be a bachelor. Of course, Mrs. Piggott professed to have knowledge of his history even before he arrived in the station. She told Mrs. Crayfield he was a very rising civilian who was considered far too brilliant to be wasted on ordinary district administration, and therefore it was intended that he should merely mark time at Rassih pending his elevation to some important appointment.

"And one can just fancy," she added spitefully, "what a conceited prig he must be, what airs he will give himself, and how he will despise us all! I haven't a doubt he's about five foot high, with short sight and a head too big for his body, can't ride or shoot, and is probably the son of a shopkeeper at Tooting or some equally refined locality. The sort of creature who gets into the Civil Service by cramming to the last ounce. They'll be the ruin of India, because the right kind of natives know they aren't 'sahibs' and hate them accordingly, while the wrong sort take advantage of their weak points. I hope you'll sit on him well, Mrs. Crayfield."

Stella felt a faint curiosity to view a sample of the competitive system so condemned by Mrs. Piggott. She had also heard her husband deplore the modern measures that permitted Messrs. Brown,

Jones and Robinson to help govern the most aristocratic country in the world. But one morning, within the orthodox and inconvenient hours decreed for first calls in the East (one of the few relics of old John Company customs), when the visiting card of Mr. Philip Ferguson Flint was brought to her, it was followed by no under-sized, top-heavy specimen such as Mrs. Piggott had described, but by a good-looking fellow not much over thirty, with friendly blue eyes, and no trace of "airs" in his bearing, unless a certain well-bred self-confidence could be imputed to conceit.

Philip Flint was taken aback in his turn. If he had thought about his chief's wife at all, save as a personage to be called upon without delay as in duty bound, he had certainly foreseen an amiable, middle-aged memsahib who would perhaps rescue him good-naturedly from the discomforts of the Government rest house until he could find suitable quarters for himself. Here, instead, was one of the prettiest girls he had ever beheld, incredibly young, unless indeed she was the daughter, not the wife, of the Commissioner.

As he entered she was standing in the centre of the big room, a slim, white-gowned figure beneath the slow-swaying punkah, and its movement stirred gently the bright little curls on her forehead —adorable curls. And what eyes, with thick, feathery lashes upcurved at the tips. Great Cæsar! what luck, after all, that Rassih should have been his portion. And to think how he had grumbled at the prospect of such exile even for a few months!

"Miss Crayfield?" he said tentatively, and at the same moment he caught sight of her wedding ring, the only ring she was wearing. "I mean"—correcting himself hastily, with a sense of acute disappointment—"Mrs. Crayfield." Solemnly they shook hands. Then their eyes met and they both laughed. That mutual, spontaneous laughter sealed an instinctive friendship. Stella waved him to a chair and took one herself. Previous to his arrival she had been feeling so languid, so dull; now everything was different; the very atmosphere became cheerful, the heat less oppressive.

"You must forgive my mistake," he said, and his blue eyes twinkled, "but it was your fault. You don't look quite like a Mrs. Commissioner, at least, not the kind I am accustomed to."

"Oh, you're not the first person to reproach me for being young," Stella told him, thinking of Mrs. Cuthell. "I really shall have to do something if the hot weather refuses to turn my hair grey."

"What did the other people say?" he inquired lightly, though in truth he felt curious to know if these same other people had been men who, like himself, were nonplussed by the sight of her beauty and youth.

"Nothing at all nice, so perhaps we'd better talk about something else. Tell me, what do you think of Rassih?"

"Until this morning I thought it a God-forsaken hole!"

She blushed, divining the bold insinuation. He

watched the bright colour creep into her cheeks, delighting in her moment of embarrassment. Then he came to her aid with commonplace remarks as to the climate, the surroundings, the new railway line.

"It doesn't strike a new-comer as a tempting spot, but it must be interesting for anyone with a weakness for Indian history."

"Oh, *don't* begin about the mutiny and this dreadful old house!" protested Stella.

He glanced at her, puzzled. "But I wasn't thinking so much of the mutiny. Did you never hear of George Thomas?"

"George Thomas! Who was he?"

"One of the old military adventurers who paved the way for the British occupation of India. He very nearly conquered the Punjab, and established himself in this district, coining his own rupees, and manufacturing his own arms and ammunition, and he was always for his King and country. But he failed, beaten by the French under Perron, and through treachery among his native followers; also partly, I'm afraid, because at critical moments he was generally drunk!"

"Oh, poor dear!" Stella's eyes shone with interest. "And what happened to him?"

"He died on his way down country with his wife and family, broken-hearted, more or less a fugitive, but still, it is said, having certain possessions in the shape of money and jewels and shawls. His tomb has never been found, nor is it known what became of his descendants. I often wonder if any of them

are living to-day. There is a story that on one occasion, when he was looking at a map of India, in which British territory was then, as now, coloured red, he ran his hand over the whole of the map and said, 'All this ought to be red.' That was the real spirit of his ambitions. I'll lend you a book about him if you like."

"*Like!* Please let me have it to-day—to-morrow."

He laughed at her enthusiasm. "Very well, directly my things are unpacked. His career would make a fine subject for a romance."

"Why don't you write it?"

He paused reflectively.

"*Are* you writing it? Do tell me," urged Stella.

"No, but I should like to try. Will you help me?"

"How on earth could *I* help you?"

"By allowing me to read you my efforts as they go along. There is nothing so stimulating to a would-be author as a long-suffering listener."

Wily Philip Ferguson Flint! Mentally he congratulated himself on having hit on a subtle device whereby he might secure a delightful intimacy with this captivating young person. He pictured long hours alone in her company countenanced by a reasonable excuse. The romance should be started immediately. Blessings on the memory of poor, stout-hearted, tipsy George Thomas!

"I should be only too delighted. There would be nothing long-suffering about it." Then doubt crept into her mind as to how Robert would regard

such a plan. Probably he would grudge her this pleasure as he grudged her all others, with the exception of riding and petty occupations. Well, if he did she must contrive to hoodwink him somehow. For this morning at least she could enjoy Mr. Flint's society. He seemed in no hurry to go, and she told him all about the Carringtons, and her regret that, being a girl, she could not follow in their footsteps; confided to him how she had craved to reach India, disclosed, perhaps unconsciously, the vague dissatisfaction she felt with her daily life now that her wish was accomplished.

"Why did *you* choose to come to India?" she asked him with frank curiosity, and was thrilled sympathetically when he told her that he too had been born with an hereditary call in his blood for the East.

"I come of an old Anglo-Indian stock myself. I'm the fifth generation of my family to serve the Indian Government. It seemed somehow inevitable that I should come out here. I passed high enough for the English Civil, but I chose India without hesitation. Apart from family links with the country, I didn't fancy being mewed up in an office from morning till night, with little prospect of getting to the top of the ladder, and not enough money for sport and the kind of amusements I like. Dances and dinners and tea-parties are not in my line. Out here I can afford a good horse and unlimited cartridges, and I know I can be useful to India in my small way. I mean to end up with a Lieutenant-Governorship at least."

"You are very ambitious," exclaimed Stella; but it was as if she cried "Hear, hear."

"Call it a passion for success," he said, smiling; and Stella felt that deep determination lay beneath the smile and in his nature, and with her whole being she applauded his aspirations.

"You will get the Star of India," she said, hardly knowing why the particular reward should suddenly have recurred to her.

"A star worth striving for," he said seriously, "even if it should burn one's wings."

"Oh, how I envy you!" Tears rose to her eyes. "And I, who love India too, can do nothing—can never be useful!"

"Who knows? Your chance may come."

"If it does you may be sure I shall take it." Just then Stella looked up, to see Sher Singh standing in the doorway, and she realised that for the last few moments the man had been coughing gently to attract her attention. Was she never to be free from this perpetual spying and watching?

"What is it?" she asked impatiently in Hindustani.

"Your highness"—with a low salaam—"the sahib has sent a message. Will Fer-lint Sahib go to the office? The Commissioner-Sahib desires his presence."

Mr. Flint rose. "Well, good-bye, Mrs. Crayfield. Needs must when official devildom drives. I will tell you when the George Thomas romance is well started."

"Don't forget the book about him you promised

to lend me," said Stella eagerly. But when he had gone she gave herself over to a frenzy of suspicion. Had Sher Singh told Robert that she was laughing and talking with "Fer-lint Sahib"? and had the message been sent with a purpose? She dreaded yet looked for Robert's return, so that she might know where she stood in regard to Mr. Flint's visit. Perhaps it was all her imagination. The summons might have been perfectly free from intrigue on the part of Sher Singh; yet she was uneasy, and she wandered from room to room, a victim to apprehension, her condition aggravated by the knowledge that she had found such pleasure in this new friendship, fearful as she was that it might be denied her.

To her astonished relief, when Robert appeared for the midday breakfast he was accompanied by Mr. Flint, and the two seemed already to be on excellent terms.

"I've persuaded Mr. Flint to join us at breakfast," Robert explained to her pompously; but after this he took no notice of his wife, talking "shop" persistently with his new subordinate—all about revenue, and boundaries, and agricultural prospects, of the danger of famine should the monsoon fail or be fatally late. Stella listened with interest, though perforce she was excluded from the conversation, and instinctively she understood why Mr. Flint made no attempt to draw her into it. Mr. Flint was setting himself to please his superior, for which intention she felt thankful to him; also she was dimly aware that his object was two-fold, that he meant to make

friends with Robert in order that he might the more easily be permitted to make friends with her. She effaced herself purposely, and welcomed the sudden intrusion of an excited fox terrier, who rushed into the room wildly in quest of his master.

"I must apologise for Jacob," said Mr. Flint, as the dog leapt upon him with yelps of joy. "I thought I had left him safely tied up."

Robert endured the interruption with good enough grace. He did not like dogs, would not keep any himself—to Stella's disappointment. But the disturbance was trivial. He made no comment when his wife enticed Jacob to her side with succulent scraps from her plate, and soon had him seated contentedly on her lap, lolling a red tongue, casting affectionate glances at his master across the table. To Philip this seemed a good omen. Jacob as a rule was not fond of ladies, except of his own species, and his wholesale acceptance of Mrs. Crayfield's attentions was somewhat surprising. Flint was careful to ignore Jacob, much as Colonel Crayfield ignored his wife, and he was secretly entertained when, the meal over, and Mrs. Crayfield rose from the table, Jacob trotted after her into the drawing-room, leaving his master to smoke and continue his talk with the Commissioner. Master Jacob was no fool; he knew when he had found an entrancing companion.

The morning had been a success, but Philip took his dog back to the Rest House that afternoon with feelings divided. To him the situation in regard to

the Crayfields was now clear enough—an elderly man married to a young and beautiful wife whose heart was still whole, the husband loftily secure in his authority, his ownership. There was danger in prospect unless he could be certain of keeping his head; and as he thought of the girl's beauty, her youth, her attractions, and her obvious interest in himself, he feared for his own strength of mind. It might be more than wise to abandon all schemes for meetings that were not inevitable; but the temptation was strong, and he knew very well that to a certain extent he should yield to it. All the same, he would have to walk warily. An entanglement at this stage of his career might be fatal to his advancement. Colonel Crayfield was hardly the type of a complacent husband, and he had known cases during his service when appearances only had brought about irrevocable disaster to foolish, flirtatious couples who in deed as well as in purpose were innocent of actual harm.

After all, with the cynicism of circumstances, it was Colonel Crayfield himself who made matters easy. He had taken a fancy to his new assistant, invited him frequently to singles at tennis, and never suspected that Flint let him win, or beat him by such a small margin that the defeat had a stimulating effect. Stella sat by and watched these games, Jacob reposing on the edge of her skirt, or more often on her lap. Robert bore with the presence of Jacob, unless he ran after the balls or barked piercingly at squirrels. Then the Commissioner shouted abuse at "that damned dog," and Flint administered chas-

tisement, ostensibly severe, in reality mild, that caused Jacob to retire affronted beneath Stella's chair.

When the swift Indian dusk descended, Robert, who perspired abnormally under exertion, would hasten indoors for a bath and a change, with Sher Singh in attendance, unwitting of the fact that his wife and young Flint invariably sat on side by side in the hot, scented darkness as happy companions, their fellowship ripening dangerously with each hour they could compass alone one with the other. Skilfully Flint had brought the George Thomas romance into play. He talked of it openly before Colonel Crayfield, and one night, when he was dining with the Crayfields, he confessed he had brought one or two chapters with him that he proposed, with their consent, to inflict after dinner on his host and hostess. Robert grunted contemptuously, Stella had the acumen to agree with polite indifference, and when the reading began Robert at once went to sleep and snored. The chapters were short, and, truth to tell, of little literary value, though written in easy style with a talented pen, costing the author no effort. But Stella was deeply impressed and interested. She longed to hear more of the hero, the young man of high birth who had got into such a scrape at home that he was forced to flee the country, and found himself in the service of a treacherous old native lady, the Begum Somru, whose commander-in-chief at the time was an Irish adventurer, one George Thomas. And while Robert slept and snored, Philip read and Stella listened. Then, the manuscript

laid aside, they talked India in subdued voices to their hearts' content. This programme was repeated more than once, until Robert turned restive.

"Bother the boy!" he said. "Why does he want to write all this rubbish—wasting his time!"

"It's his way of amusing himself," Stella suggested carelessly, "like me with my painting and fancy work."

"Well, it doesn't amuse me to hear it, or you either, I should imagine."

"I confess I'm rather interested in the story. I feel I want to know what happens next."

"Then let him spout it at some other time, when I'm not present. I suppose there'll be no peace till it's finished. Give him a gentle hint."

"I'll try. But won't it hurt his feelings?"

"Not any more than my going to sleep directly he starts reading, I should think."

Therefore, on the next occasion, before the manuscript could be unfolded, Stella went to the piano.

"No reading to-night, Mr. Flint. We're going to have some music. I want you to hear how my husband can sing. Come along, Robert." Her fingers rippled lightly over the keys, and Robert sang readily, lustily, song after song, much to his own enjoyment, and presumably to that of the guest, who applauded with tact, and requested encores till the performer, in high good humour, declared he was hoarse and could sing no more. Then Mrs. Crayfield continued the concert, and Philip sat gazing

his fill at the vision she presented, the light from the wall-lamp behind her gilding her hair, her voice sweet and true, causing his heart to ache with ominous yearning. He felt confident she found pleasure in his friendship, yet to-night he was puzzled by her attitude until, the music put away and the piano closed, she said with an assumption of matronly indulgence: "I'm afraid we haven't considered poor George Thomas. How is he getting on?"

"Oh, pretty well, thank you."

"Has the slave girl escaped?"

"Not yet; it's rather difficult; but I mustn't bore you any more with my attempts at fiction." Purposely he spoke in a tone of humble discouragement; he was feeling his way.

"Bring the stuff over to-morrow before we play tennis," suggested Robert magnanimously, "and the memsahib will listen; stories amuse her."

"Oh, may I? But," turning to Stella, "won't it interfere with your afternoon siesta?"

"Not a bit," Mrs. Crayfield assured him. "I never can sleep in the daytime, but Robert must have a rest. I tell him he works for too hard."

"Young bully, aren't you?" was Colonel Crayfield's playful retort, laying his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Take my advice, Flint, and when you marry don't choose a wife from the schoolroom."

"Judging by your example, sir," chaffed Philip, "one might do worse."

"Well, all things considered, I suppose I've been lucky. Good night. I shall expect to lick you to-morrow at tennis after you've exhausted yourself and my wife with your intellectual exertions."

"Not if I can help it," said Philip, diplomatically defiant.

CHAPTER X

When Mrs. Antonio pronounced Rassih to be "a very hot place," her words at the time had conveyed little to Stella of what to expect. The heat grew fiercer than she could have believed possible; the blazing sun, the scorching wind, the nights that seemed equally long and hot as the days, without variation of temperature save for the worse. There was no escape, no deliverance, and the rains tarried. Despite her youth and her health, she flagged, lost her appetite, lived chiefly on tea and iced mango-fool, with all the short-sightedness of the young in matters of nourishment. Robert, on the contrary, appeared to thrive. He ate well, slept soundly, rode and played tennis as usual. His very vigour was exhausting to his wife.

Now the only ladies left in the station besides herself were Mrs. Beard and Mrs. Antonio. Martha and Mary and Deborah were dispatched (at the mission expense) to cooler climes; Pussy Antonio was on a long visit "up hill" to relations; Mrs. Piggott had fled, like the rest, to the Himalayas. Therefore Mrs. Crayfield's "at homes" were for the present in abeyance, and had it not been for Philip Flint, the monotony of her days would have become well-nigh intolerable. Stella lived for the sight of his face and the sound of his voice. Whether she might have welcomed his society with equal delight

had he been Mrs. or Miss Flint, possessing the same tastes and interests, had not occurred to her. One source of annoyance during his visits ceased suddenly—Champa and Sher Singh no longer peeped and peered from the doorways. On the other hand, Champa began to behave as if she recognised, and was ready to abet, an intrigue that must be kept from the Commissioner's knowledge. Early one morning she sidled into the bedroom with a note that had arrived from Mr. Flint for Mrs. Crayfield, hiding it beneath her wrapper, looking unutterable warnings, since the sahib was half awake. She handed it covertly to her mistress. In a flash Stella recognised what lay in the woman's mind, and she made haste to rouse Robert as she took the note and opened it.

"Mr. Flint has got fever," she told him; "he won't be able to play tennis this evening."

"Say salaam," she added severely to Champa, who retired, snubbed, to give the messenger the orthodox message of acknowledgment.

This episode worried Stella. She was not yet so conversant with Oriental outlook as to comprehend that to the native mind there could be but one interpretation of her intimacy with a sahib who was not her husband nor in any way related to her. She felt enraged, humiliated, by Champa's assumption that she must wish to conceal the note from Robert, and in consequence she passed a restless morning after a long, hot ride that drained her energy. It was the old *munshi's* day with his pupil; but when he presented himself with his pen-box and sheaf of

yellow papers, she could not settle down to the lesson, was unable to fix her attention, and, pleading a headache, she dismissed him politely. Then she tried writing her weekly letter to The Chestnuts; but her hand clung damp to the paper, and she had not the strength of will to persevere; the keys of the piano stuck to her fingers; it was useless attempting to paint or to embroider. Finally she sat idle in the darkened room, permitting her thoughts to wander without aim, backwards and forwards in chaos, now in one direction, then in another, till they collided with the solid fact that her disturbance of mind was now not so much connected with Champa's insulting behaviour as with her disappointment that she was not to see Philip Flint that afternoon, a vexation aggravated by anxiety concerning his condition. Had he got all he needed? He was still in the Rest House, and she pictured him lying sick and helpless in the hot and hideous little building. Had he plenty of ice? She knew the supply was limited. She would have liked to order soup or jelly to be prepared for him, but the order would have to go through Sher Singh. The day wore on as usual. The heavy midday breakfast, Robert's rest afterwards, her own efforts to read while he slept. By tea-time her head ached definitely and badly. Robert suggested that another ride would do it good. She might like to try the grey stud-bred he had bought the other day, since her own mare had already been out in the morning.

"I can't ride again to-day," she declared fretfully. "I don't feel up to it. You had better try the grey yourself."

At once he became significantly solicitous, and the meaning in his questions and concern annoyed her still further.

"Oh, do go," she cried, exasperated at last, "and leave me alone. I want to be quiet. My head aches, that's all."

He grumbled a little that Flint should be ailing and therefore unavailable for tennis. He could not decide whether to try the grey or to send for one of the Public Works assistants to play with him. On inquiry it was ascertained that the young man in question was still out in the district; and finally, to his wife's relief, he ordered the grey to be saddled and set off for a solitary ride.

Stella repaired to the front balcony to see him mount and to wave him a friendly farewell in apology for her ill-humour. The grey was a satisfactory purchase, a handsome animal, well up to weight, but evidently hot-tempered, and gave trouble at the start. Certainly Santa-Sahib looked his best on a horse. He was a good rider, and for a moment Stella repented her peevish refusal to ride with him. Then erratically the question occurred to her: Supposing there was an accident, supposing Robert were killed, how would she feel?

It was as if she awaited an answer from beyond her own brain, and for answer there came to her the sudden vision of Philip Flint. He seemed to be standing before her. She saw his blue eyes, heard his slow, pleasant voice. What did it mean? Aghast at her thoughts, shadowy and indefinite though they were, she rushed back to the drawing-room, shaking,

unstrung, with the feeling that she had committed murder in her heart. She was a wicked creature! Oh, why had she married Robert? Why had she not stayed at The Chestnuts with grandmamma and the aunts, ignorant, safe, however dull? Nothing but evil had come of her yearnings for India, and there was no one to whom she could turn for help, for advice, for sympathy.

In trembling haste, but without purpose, she put on a hat and went out into the compound. Involuntarily she glanced around for Sher Singh, but for a wonder he was nowhere to be seen, and impulsively she decided to call on Mrs. Antonio—anything to escape from the harassing fancies that beset her.

The house occupied by the Antonios was no distance, built as it was on a further portion of the fort walls; it stood prominent against the copper-coloured sky, encouraging the venture. . . .

Mrs. Antonio was at home. As Stella sat in the drawing-room awaiting her appearance she noticed a curious smell; it recalled to her mind Mrs. Piggott's belief that the doctor, if not his wife as well, indulged in the hookah. And why not, queried Stella, if they liked it? though the taste was not easy to understand judging by the acrid odour! The room felt fusty, was crammed with a strange assortment of cheap bric-a-brac overlaid with dust, and the heat was insufferable.

When Mrs. Antonio appeared she presented what Stella's former school-fellows at Greystones would have described as "a sight for the blind," clad as she

was in a terrible yellow dressing-gown, a bath towel bound turban-wise about her head.

"Please excuse, Mrs. Crayfield dear," she apologised. "I have been washing my hair. I did not wish to keep you waiting. Does your ayah prepare you areca-nut wash? It is best thing!"

"I will remember," said Stella, who had brought a bountiful supply of shampoo-powders with her from England. "Champa has not told me about it."

"Oh, my, that ayah of yours, that Champa! She *is* a lazy," continued Mrs. Antonio; she unwound the towel and rubbed her grey locks as she talked. "Where did you get her?"

"She was engaged by Sher Singh, our head servant."

"Yes, and that Sher Singh!" Mrs. Antonio peered at her visitor through a screen of wet hair. "He is a badmash."

There was no need for translation, Stella knew the word well enough—it meant rascal. "I detest Sher Singh," she admitted, finding comfort in the expression of her feelings, "and I know he hates *me!*"

"Of course, what else? So many years with Colonel Crayfield, and knowing too many secrets! He is jealous. Tell your husband let him go, give a pension. He is opium-eater, all say in the bazaar."

"An opium-eater?"

"Yes, but do not say to Colonel Crayfield that I hinted. You see you are so young, Mrs. Crayfield dear. That is why I warn. If he stays that man will do harm—make mischief."

Stella shrank from exposing her helplessness in

the matter, felt ashamed also of her inclination to let things slide rather than provoke Robert's wrath. She said:

"Thank you for putting me on my guard, Mrs. Antonio. It is friendly and kind of you. Now will you tell me about the areca-nut wash for the hair? I am sure it must be excellent."

Mrs. Antonio followed the drag and plunged into directions, presented Mrs. Crayfield with a handful of the beneficial nut; then talked of Pussy's hair and other perfections until Stella made an opportunity for escape.

As she strolled home she felt further depressed. Her mind was full of Mrs. Antonio's warning; it served to strengthen her feeling of repugnance towards Sher Singh. She tried to argue with herself that there might be excellent reasons for Robert's attachment to Sher Singh apart from the value of the man's services; gratitude might be involved, possibly Sher Singh had nursed his master through a dangerous illness, or in some way saved Robert's life. Robert would never have told her; he was so secretive. He seldom spoke of the past, and she knew little or nothing of his former life. She had never induced him even to talk of his friendship with her father and mother. She hated the feeling that she was not in her husband's confidence, though she was guiltily alive to the truth that she did not exactly admit him to her own! Bother Sher Singh! He was a perpetual thorn in her flesh; she had never disliked the man more than when this evening she beheld him standing sentinel at the foot of the steep

steps that led up to the dwelling rooms on the fort walls. There he stood pompous, important, clothed in immaculate white with a smart blue belt and Robert's crest fashioned in silver fastening a band to match the belt across his big turban. She longed to get even with him, and when he started almost imperceptibly at sight of her she felt a vindictive satisfaction that for once she had eluded his vigilance. Clearly he had been ignorant of her excursion, had believed her to be sitting solitary above during the Sahib's absence. He saláamed low with what seemed to her mocking humility as she passed him, and with equally mocking disdain she ignored the salutation; not pausing to observe the effect of her insult, she went on up the steps miserably conscious that she had made a mistake.

Mrs. Antonio's assertion that Sher Singh ate opium did not disturb her unduly. She remembered vaguely to have heard that all natives took opium to a certain extent, just as most Europeans took alcohol, in moderation. She knew nothing about it, and therefore Mrs. Antonio's caution not to mention the matter to her husband seemed to her sound. But once in her bedroom the rest of the warning swung through her brain: "If he stays that man will do harm—make mischief," and panic possessed her.

It was useless to assure herself that she was making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Beneath all her defensive reasoning lay a dread apprehension that she was powerless to control. It was all so intangible, so exasperating, this heavy-hearted sense of foreboding without actual foundation. Despairingly she

sought refuge in making the worst of her headache; that, at least, was definite enough. She summoned Champa and prepared for bed, so that when Robert returned from his ride she might plead indisposition as an excuse for absenting herself from the dinner table.

Robert accepted the excuse in all good faith. He prescribed a dose of quinine and a glass of iced champagne, both of which she swallowed to please him, and when later he came to her room she lay still, with closed eyes, till he was safely asleep. Then she stole from her bed and went out on to the balcony. Yellow and parched the landscape lay before her, bathed in the strong Eastern moonlight, the little heaps of ruins in the foreground picked out with black shadows—relics of past power, dead echoes of ancient strife! On this spot where she stood, on the ramparts of the old Moghul fort, perhaps Emperors had stood also, unwitting of the future, of the coming downfall of their dynasty.

From Philip Flint she had learnt how the fort had been built by the great Akbar in the reign of his greater Western contemporary, Elizabeth; how it had lain with his descendants to uphold Moghul might and dominion, and how they had failed—failed before a power that was stronger in its spirit of self-sacrifice and honest purpose. 'Midst all her unease of mind she felt the magic and the marvel of the past; remembered George Thomas and his wide ambitions —a voice crying in the wilderness of turmoil and chaos and oppression of the helpless, a pioneer of the peace and protection to follow for this gorgeous

old country. Yet was the present order and prosperity doomed to pass in its turn, leaving even less traces of its influence than just ruins and remains and reminders? Would India seethe again with tyranny, murder, persecution, general insecurity of property and person, creed up against creed, custom against custom, avarice stalking the land to block and destroy all progress? Flint, she knew, feared for India's future, owing to the Western system of education that was being pursued without forethought, without judicious provision for employment that would guard against disaster. Sooner or later, he had said, there would come into power a faction that for the sake of unpractical theories and so-called "ideals" totally unsuited to the East, would liberate forces, dangerous forces already at work beneath the surface for personal gain, that would seek to oppress and intimidate the masses, render just administration impossible, degrade British rule into a farce. And then? Well then it would devolve into a choice between the withdrawal of British authority, leaving the country open to conquest from some stronger foreign nation, or a reversion to sane government, and the drastic suppression of sedition, conspiracy, and rebellion.

In face of these reflections Stella's own troubles seemed to fade into space; she felt lifted above them, indifferent to petty considerations, to the jealousy of Sher Singh, Robert's propensities and the limitations he sought to impose upon her. Now boldly, and without scruple, she permitted her imagination to run riot. Supposing she were Philip Flint's wife—how she would strive to help and encourage him, how she

would fling herself into his work and his aspirations, each of them doing their utmost, hand in hand, for the welfare of the country they both loved! Heart and brain afire she paced the broad balcony in a maze of fictitious delight; to-night there was little sound, no howling of beasts save in the far distance where jackals hunted in packs; and, near at hand, only the soft murmur of the city beyond the walls. Spell-bound, as in a dream, she loitered; the heat was intense in the quiet, the desolation, the hard yellow light of the moon, but it seemed merely to caress her limbs, to encourage the intoxication of her fancies.

A sudden sound shattered the reverie; a dull thud as if something had fallen within the building from the roof to the foundations. . . . Again—this time it was less loud, less definite, rumbling away into silence. She listened, alert, her heart beating quickly; then came reassurance with the recollection of Mrs. Cuthell's conviction that strange echoes were caused by the occasional fall of masonry below in the underground ruins. Wrenched back to reality she returned to the darkened bedroom, once more a prey to restless depression. Robert lay sleeping profoundly, his deep, regular breathing, and the monotonous flap of the punkah frill, were the only sounds she could discern as she lay wide awake, her senses sharpened, her nerves overwrought. But just as a hint of drowsiness gave hope of repose for body and mind, again she heard something that this time could not be attributed to the falling of bricks or stones, since, of a certainty, it was within the room.

A light patter on the matting, a pause, hesitation, a faint whimper. . . .

In sheer terror Stella leapt from her bed; could it be a ghost—the spirit of a helpless little child massacred with other victims of the great tragedy in this hateful house? Only by the strongest effort she refrained from shrieking aloud as a soft touch fell on her ankle; it was the warm, wet lick of a tongue. She was thankful she had raised no disturbance when by the dim radiance of the moon through the open doorways she saw no ghost, no child, but only Jacob! —Jacob with a broken strip of cord hanging to his collar, apologetic, unhappy, squirming at her feet in his dumb, pathetic attempts to explain his desertion of his master.

Stella consoled the little dog, let him lie by her side on the bed. His company brought a sense of comfort and security. Philip's servants must have imprisoned Jacob in some out-house so that his well-meant attentions should not disturb the sick man. She hoped it argued healing sleep for Philip—did not mean that he was worse. Meanwhile she must await daylight to ascertain the truth.

At last she fell asleep, Jacob's nose cuddled in the crook of her elbow, regardless of Robert's indignation when he should awake and discover the presence of "that damned dog."

CHAPTER XI

The sun poured upon the flat roof of the baking little rest-house, though the hour was yet early. Philip Flint lay limp and exhausted on a long chair in the veranda; the sharp "go" of fever had worn itself out for the time being, worn out its victim also. Through the night he had tossed and talked nonsense, shivered and burned by turns, with aching limbs and bursting head. Now the reaction seemed equally bad, if not worse, since, while the malady raged, he had at least been but vaguely aware of bodily distress; and, though harassed with hideous dreams, there had come interludes when he felt as if wafted to regions of bliss, his companion a being half goddess half mortal. One moment she floated beyond his reach in limitless space, remote as a star. . . . He had heard his own voice calling, entreating with a delirious confusion of words on his lips: "Stella—a star—Star of India——" Again she was close to him, held to his heart.

Blurred memories of these transports lingered in his mind as he lay gasping with the heat, and then came devastating doubts and warnings, sweeping the glamour away. He dared not shut his eyes to the danger, in truth he stood on the brink of a moral precipice; unless he could manœuvre a transfer from Rassih, unless in the meantime he could keep clear of the Commissioner's house, he was bound to find

himself desperately in love with the Commissioner's wife; and, without vanity, he foresaw that the situation must become equally perilous for her. What a fool he had been!—ensnared by the girl's beauty, by the tempting circumstance of her alliance with a man so much her senior for whom it was obvious she had no real affection, a man who was blind to the budding of her intellect, who merely valued her bright innocence as a whet to his senses. Yet apart from these odious reflections, apart from selfish perspective, Philip felt it was up to him now to call halt for her sake. So far they had exchanged no words that might not have been shouted from the housetops, but what price words when came mute understanding, when just a little more and they would find themselves in the grip of that eternal, immutable force called Love! And then? How should he bring himself to leave her desolate, unhappy, to face a future without hope because his own target in life was Success, fulfilment of ambition?

From the outset of his career one aim had possessed Philip Flint—to arrive, to reach the topmost rung of his particular ladder; and already his future was brilliant with promise, his progress sure, unless, through his own folly, he loosed his hold and fell back. Well he knew the power of Mother Grundy in Indian official circles, the need for avoidance of serious scandal in a country where moral standards and example must count for promotion among a community that, officially speaking, was composed of one class. In England it was possible for a man to hold high public office while his domestic belongings

socially could not be recognised; in India such a state of affairs would be wholly unworkable. Imagine a Chief Commissioner, a Lieutenant Governor, any representative of the Crown, not to mention a Viceroy, with a wife who could not be "received"! No; open scandal in India spelt failure. Therefore it was a choice for Philip Flint between heart and head; and now he asked himself grimly which was to prove the stronger?

The beat of a horse's hoofs outside scattered his thoughts. He raised himself on his elbow to see Colonel Crayfield dismounting, and a couple of peons ran forth with salaams to receive the important visitor.

Colonel Crayfield stumped up the veranda steps. "Hallo, Flint, sorry to hear you are sick," he threw his hat and whip on to a camp table, dragged a chair into convenient position and seated himself weightily. "Had a sharp bout of malaria? You look pretty well washed out!"

"Sharp and short, sir, I hope. I think I'm about over it now all right."

"Poof! the heat of this place!" the Commissioner looked about him with disgust. "Not fit for a dog. Talking of dogs, your terrier strayed up to our house last night; it worried the memsahib, because she took it into her head it must mean you were at the last gasp. I promised to come and find out if you were still alive!"

"Very kind," murmured Philip; "as usual I must apologise for Jacob, and I'm afraid he hasn't come back yet!"

"Oh, that's all right, never mind the dog. The question is, how you can ward off another attack; Rassih has a bad reputation for intermittent fever once it gets hold, and stopping in this infernal little bungalow won't help you. What do you say to coming to us for a bit? Plenty of room and no lack of ice and good milk; we'll soon have you fit. I'll send the tonga to bring you up, and your man can follow with your things."

In Philip's present enfeebled condition of body and spirit the temptation was severe; setting aside the pleasant prospect of creature comforts, food properly prepared (his own cook was woefully careless) there would be—Stella! He strove to hold on to the arguments that at the moment of Colonel Crayfield's arrival were in process of bracing his will and his judgment; now they were slipping away—if only time could be gained in which he might call them to heel, summon strength to refuse with firmness. . . .

He stirred uneasily: "It's exceedingly kind of you, sir, but I couldn't think of giving you and Mrs. Crayfield the trouble. I'm not really ill; to-morrow I shall be as fit as ever again. It's nothing but an ordinary go of malaria."

He felt he was gabbling what his chief would regard as merely conventional protests; even to himself they sounded futile, unreal.

"Rubbish!" the ejaculation was no more than he might have anticipated. "Don't be an ass. Give me a bit of paper and a pencil and I'll send word to my wife. The tonga can be here in two shakes, and I'll wait and go back with you myself."

He began to shout orders. The groom was to return with his horse and the note. Philip's personal servant was bidden to produce paper and a pencil, moreover to pack a portmanteau with his master's requirements. In a few moments the whole matter had passed from Philip's control, and he resigned himself to Fate. But what irony that Stella's husband, of all people, should be the means of forcing him into a position that, unless Fate proved unnaturally considerate, might lead right and left to disaster!

CHAPTER XII

"Oh, do go on—don't stop. I shall be miserable till I know what John Holland and Anne decided."

"But I don't know myself. That's as far as I've written. I was going to ask *you* what you thought they should do. What do you think?"

Flint laid the sheets of manuscript, the George Thomas Romance, on the wicker table that stood between himself and his hostess. The two were seated on the balcony, though it was late in the morning. Rain had fallen over-night, and the temperature was lowered for the present—not that the monsoon had actually broken up-country, but reports were hopeful, and for the past few days there had been a welcome gathering of clouds culminating in a heavy downpour. Still the fear remained that the clouds might yet disperse, to leave the district parched and arid as before.

The desert steamed like a gigantic hot-bed, the atmosphere was reminiscent of an orchid house, but at least there was temporary respite from imprisonment in closed and darkened rooms, and the air wafted from a hand-punkah, wielded with vigour by a youthful coolie, was comparatively cool and refreshing. Philip Flint, set free from the tortures of the Rest House, had quickly recovered condition despite a recurrence of fever—just a sufficient recurrence to justify prolongation of his stay with the

Crayfields, a short extension of idleness encouraged by his unsuspecting Chief. To-morrow he intended to return to his uncomfortable quarters; work must be resumed; meanwhile he had lived in a golden dream, oblivious of the future that now loomed before him like a grey, empty tomb, compared with the rapturous present.

As he gazed unceasingly at Stella nothing seemed to matter if only he could hear from her lips that she cared for him. Beloved! how perfect she was from the sheen of her pretty head as she bent over some trifling needlework, to the tips of her little arched feet; and her nature was as sweet and tender and white as her slim body——

"Well, what do you think?" he persisted recklessly; and in repeating the question he knew he was heading for danger, as a rider might put a runaway horse to an impossible fence that the inevitable crash should come quickly, prove neck or nothing.

She hesitated, sighed. "Oh! I don't know. To begin with, you see, Anne was married, and her husband, though she hated him, was fighting like John, under George Thomas. Would it have meant trouble, disgrace, for John if——"

"If they had bolted? Perhaps; though in those days it might have been different. But apart from that—what about the marriage question? If you had been Anne?"

"I should have done what was best for John."

"Even if it meant parting from him for ever?"

"Of course!" she said stoutly.

"Not simply because you were married?"

She raised her eyes from the foolish strip of embroidery engaging her fingers.

"Stella!"

There! The fence was taken, the crash had come. Now they must both face the truth, outwardly self-controlled because—what bathos! because of the punkah coolie and the open doors. Philip cursed the fact that privacy in India was next to impossible; he saw that Stella's eyes were brimming with tears. How her hands trembled! Yet he did not dare give her comfort by taking her in his arms. As in his dream, she was far from him, inapproachable as her namesake, a star.

The silence that fell between them was tense; the swish of the punkah went steadily on, the heat grew heavier, more saturating; in the hazy sky a vulture alternately sailed and dipped, hung motionless as though suspended by an invisible wire, on the outlook for some carrion prize below.

Then Philip found himself speaking rapidly, in a low voice; his hands gripped the edge of the table so tightly that his knuckles showed white and hard through the skin. He scarcely knew what he was saying, self-mastery was gone, and in the flood of his passionate declaration Stella shivered and blanched. He saw love in her eyes, but fear also—fear and helpless despair. He paused, drew in his breath sharply, but so far he felt no penitence, no remorse for having let himself go; he was conscious only of a wild exultation, for he knew that in heart and in soul she was his. He craved to hear from her lips that she loved him; she must tell him—not with her eyes

alone. That it was cruel to force the admission he did not, in his madness, consider.

"Speak to me, Stella—just say it, say it once. *Tell* me."

Her lips moved, he bent forward. But before he could catch the whisper she had risen abruptly, to pass with swift steps into the house. He rose in his turn to stay her flight, and was confronted on the threshold of the open doorway by Sher Singh.

Disconcerting as was the man's unexpected appearance, it was to Philip merely an accidental, if enraging, check to his intention; it accounted for Stella's sudden retreat—from where she had sat she must have caught sight of Sher Singh's approach. But relief quickly followed exasperation as he realised how narrow had been their escape from an equivocal situation, for next moment Colonel Crayfield was in the room. Sher Singh's unwelcome intrusion had, after all, been timely, and thanks to the numerous exits of an Indian habitation Stella had vanished just a second or two before the entry of her husband. . . .

The rest of the morning was charged for them both with repressed emotion. They sat at the breakfast table outwardly composed, inwardly fearful of meeting each other's gaze. Stella's mental disturbance was increased by the conviction that Sher Singh was on the watch; he must have observed that she and Philip were engaged in no ordinary conversation when he surprised them on the balcony, must have noted her confusion as she passed him in her flight. Now she realised her folly in not

having held her ground; she should have remained in her seat and given warning to Philip by speaking promptly to Sher Singh, since of course the man shared Champa's belief that a guilty understanding was afoot between herself and "Fer-lint sahib." No doubt it was he who, in the first place, had suggested the idea to Champa. Her fears in connection with Mrs. Antonio's warnings had dwindled during the days of Philip's visit, but now mental torment returned with the feeling that Sher Singh was but biding his time for mischief with the deadly patience of the Oriental. Dread lest he should lead Robert to scent the situation that had arisen between herself and Philip turned her sick.

Deeming it more prudent to avoid Philip for the immediate present, she sat in her room while Robert rested, her mind in confusion as she pretended to read. To ignore Philip's outpouring, to continue as if nothing disturbing had occurred, was clearly impossible. Philip must be warned; but how to contrive that warning without risk of being spied upon was a problem. Even could she accomplish it safely she shrank from facing the days to come with this secret between them. She contemplated appealing to Robert to allow her to take advantage of Mrs. Cuthell's invitation, on the score that she could endure the heat no longer; but should he refuse, as was more than probable, could Philip be induced to apply for leave, however short, on the plea of health? Something must be done, and without delay, that she might gain time to set her mind in order, free from continual trepidation. If

only she could secure the chance of a long private talk with Philip. . . .

Wearily she sat in the drawing-room before the tea-table that afternoon, awaiting the two men. Robert, when he went to his dressing-room, had said that if the courts were not too damp for tennis, and if Flint felt up to it, they might try a game. He was the first to appear, and evidently he was not in a good humour. Stella's heart sank at sight of his frown, but bounded next moment with relief when she heard the cause. It seemed that Sher Singh, as well as herself, desired "leave of absence."

"Confound the fellow," Robert grumbled, "he's just had a telegram, and says he must go off at once to see to the funeral of some near relation."

"How long does he want?"

"He says only two or three days, but with natives that may mean anything."

Stella trusted privately that in this case it might mean two or three weeks.

"He suggested that if Flint were staying on with us for the present his man could look after me for the time."

"But Mr. Flint has arranged to go back to the Rest House to-morrow——"

"Then he'd better alter his arrangements. He's no trouble, and it's far more comfortable for him here. Don't you want him to stay?"

"I don't care particularly one way or the other, but on the whole I'd rather we were alone."

Oh, shades of conscience! Stella bent over the tea things, ashamed of her hypocrisy.

Robert's face cleared. He beamed complacently. "We can't always expect to be alone, little selfish one!"

"When does Sher Singh want to go?"

"By this time he's gone, I imagine. He intended to catch the afternoon train."

"Well, it can't be helped," said Stella, "and of course if you wish it, I'll press Mr. Flint to stay. Now he can be at work again I shan't have to entertain him——"

"Or listen to his eternal novel."

"I don't mind that; but it's a bore making conversation."

"Yes, I understand. Well, anyway it's a charity to put him up for a bit longer, and he can sing for his supper by trying to beat me at tennis every day. Here he comes——"

Stella looked up. There was Philip in flannels; his expression was sad, dispirited, as though he too had been ground in the mill of mental perplexity during the last two or three hours. There came a singing in her ears, a mist clouded her vision. How horrible for them both to be forced to play a part—a part so ignoble, opposed to her whole nature, and, she felt assured, to his also.

"Enter Mr. Flint!" declaimed Robert with jovial intonation. "The memsahib and I were just talking about you, my son."

"What were you saying? Nothing nasty, I hope?" He avoided Stella's eyes as he seated himself and took the cup she held out to him.

"Quite the contrary," puffed Robert. "We were

planning to persuade you to stay on with us, especially as my bearer has demanded short leave, and yours, with your permission, might fill the gap for the time being!"

Stella noted a slight flicker of Philip's eyelids, and her ear caught the echo of self-control in his voice as he answered: "You are very kind—and of course if my man can be of the slightest use——"

"Very well then, that's settled." Robert attacked the eatables, talking the while of rain and crops and the uncertainty of the outlook. "Unless things improve pretty soon there is a difficult time ahead," he predicted.

And Stella repeated the foreboding in her heart, though from a very different standpoint.

Tennis, after all, proved impossible. The courts were a swamp, and as Robert clamoured for exercise the three set off eventually for a late and, to Stella, a tedious ride. She was too troubled even to find pleasure in the after-effect of the rain upon the scenery, though she could not but observe the wondrous vermilion and purple of the sky, the great clouds massed on the horizon like some angry army awaiting the word to press forward, or to retire; the colour reflections on the long streaks of water that still lay upon the earth's hard surface; the rows of birds gathered on the edges of the miniature lakes, suggesting, in the distance, broken borders of white stones. The trees were washed of their drab veiling of dust, and foliage shone in the light of the sinking sun; an odour of earth refreshed rose in the thick, hot air. . . . But the mighty magnificence above,

the glow flung over the flat, interminable landscape, served but to increase her sense of helpless despondence.

There seemed so little hope of safe conference with Philip, and, though the strain of his presence held for her as much happiness as fear, it was imperative that some plan of separation should be devised unless they were to embark on a course of intrigue and deception that, even apart from any question of conscience, must involve risk of disaster. . . . Bewildered, unbalanced, as she rode between her husband and the man she loved, she felt that her life was broken and stained already.

Next day the two men were out in the district on duty from morning to evening. Stella passed the period of their absence in a state bordering on stupefaction; each hour that went by, devoid of an opportunity for clear understanding with Philip, seemed to widen the zone of danger. That night as she dressed for dinner the reflection of her face in the mirror appalled her—what a scarecrow, how white and haggard and hideous! Limp though she felt from the moist heat, oppressed as she was with her tribulation of mind, she made a brave effort to amend her appearance—rearranged her hair, bade Champa get out a becoming pink frock, stockings and shoes to go with it, opened her jewel-box, meaning to wear her pearl necklace. . . .

The pearl necklace was not in its case. At first unperturbed Stella searched among her trinkets, only gradually to realise that the necklace was undoubtedly gone. Champa when questioned of course knew

nothing about it, she might almost have been unaware that her mistress possessed any jewels at all! Then she suggested that the memsahib might have lost the necklace out riding, and in response to Stella's derisive rejection of such an absurd idea she dissolved into tears, protesting that she, at least, was no thief, however wicked the rest of the servant-people might be.

"Go and tell the Sahib I wish to speak to him," commanded Stella severely; it was not that she suspected Champa for one moment of having stolen the necklace, but the woman's cowardly attitude incensed her. She understood nothing of the prevalent fear among native servants of false accusation contrived by some colleague intent upon personal purpose, whether vengeful or in the hope of advancement, no matter at whose expense. Champa sidled muttering from the room, and presently Robert came in half dressed. His face shone with perspiration, his neck, minus a collar, reminded his wife of a chunk of raw meat, and suddenly she felt indifferent as to whether the necklace he had given her was lost irretrievably or not; she wished she had not summoned him.

"What's the matter, you're not ill?" he inquired.

"My pearl necklace has gone," she said, much as she might have announced the disappearance of some trivial article.

"Good God!" Robert pounced upon the jewel-box, turning the contents over with ruthless hands.

"It's not there," Stella told him.

"Then where the devil is it? When did you wear it last?"

"I can't remember."

"Nonsense! You often wear it in the daytime as well as in the evening—you must have missed it before now, if it had been gone any time. It's worth hundreds. Where have you looked? It may be among your clothes——"

"I always put it back in the case. I haven't looked anywhere else."

"Good Heavens, then do so at once! Where's the ayah, what has she got to say?"

"She doesn't know any more than I do what has happened to it. I suppose I ought to have kept the box locked."

"And if you had you'd have left the key lying about. You're so infernally careless."

Robert raved and stormed, while Stella and Champa ransacked drawers and wardrobes without result. The necklace was not forthcoming. Dinner was postponed, every servant in the establishment was called up, and the whole staff was threatened with dismissal, imprisonment, punishment, unless the pearls were produced.

CHAPTER XIII

THE disappearance of the pearls caused general commotion throughout the Commissioner's establishment. Perforce the police were called in to make investigations, and Mr. Piggott being absent from the station on duty, the chief native subordinate took command of the compound and set up a species of martial law. The servants, in terror of secret extortion under threat of false proof or suspicion, seemed to lose their wits, and either blundered idiotically over their duties or forgot them altogether. Champa collapsed, distraught with agitation, and refused to stir from her quarters.

Robert talked of little else but the loss.

"Such a thing has never happened before in *my* household," he kept repeating, as they sat at an uncomfortable meal next midday. "You are perfectly certain, Stella, that you haven't mislaid the necklace or dropped it anywhere?"

And each time he asked the question Stella replied wearily, "I am perfectly certain," until she felt tempted at last to declare that she had thrown away the pearls of deliberate intention. Her nerves were on edge, and she found it hard to control her temper. Mercifully, breakfast was now practically over.

"What about that man of yours, Flint? How long have you had him?"

"Five years, and he's certainly not the thief, if

that's what you mean. He's a respectable, simple-minded old fellow with a long record of good service to his credit."

Robert grunted incredulously and lit a cheroot. "That ayah knows something," he suggested to his wife, "or why hasn't she turned up this morning?"

"She's ill," said Stella, "ill with fright, I should think."

"A guilty conscience more likely."

"I'm quite sure she had nothing to do with it."

Annoying as Champa had been, Stella was convinced of the woman's honesty.

"How can you be sure? Don't talk nonsense."

"Well, wasn't she engaged by Sher Singh?" She felt she had scored, and emboldened by the advantage, added recklessly: "If it comes to that, I would sooner believe that Sher Singh——"

"Sher Singh," interrupted Robert angrily. "On the contrary, if he had been here the thing wouldn't have happened. Some rascal took the opportunity of his absence."

"Then, unless it was all prearranged, the thief must have acted pretty promptly," argued Stella, who had arrived at a pitch of provocation that rendered her indifferent to Robert's displeasure. "Perhaps the telegram was bogus?" she continued ironically; "sent to lure the unsuspecting Sher Singh from his post." And with an effort she quelled a ridiculous impulse to add that possibly Sher Singh had borrowed the necklace in order that some member of his family might wear it at the relative's funeral. She came dangerously near to laughter in picturing

the scene that such a suggestion would evoke. As it was, her sly attack on the good name of Sher Singh led to mixed consequences.

Robert rose impatiently. "Sher Singh must come back. If a wire goes at once he ought to be here to-night."

Stella repented her imprudence; on the other hand, as Robert strode from the room to fulfil his intention, there was comfort in the fact that at last she and Philip were safely alone for a space. The table servants, at work in the pantry, were well out of hearing; the punkah coolie at his post could not see them.

Philip said breathlessly: "Stella, what are we to do?"

The moments were precious; she answered with haste, though her voice was calm. "One of us must go away. It's the only thing to do. Sher Singh——"

"What has Sher Singh to do with it?"

"He knows, he has been watching us. He would do anything to harm me. Anyway, we couldn't go on like this——"

"It's all my fault," he said wretchedly. "What a selfish beast I have been. I ought to have held my tongue."

"What difference would it have made? We both *knew!*"

He was amazed at her fortitude. No longer was she the helpless, unhappy child weighed down by relentless fate, but a woman determined to grapple with the future. The Carrington spirit of pluck and endurance still lived in the last of the line.

A little cloud of masculine grievance gathered in his mind, rose between them. His was the blame for the whole situation, and he was prepared to sacrifice all for her sake, to take her away that they might live for themselves alone. Since his outburst on the balcony wild schemes had invaded his brain, though as yet, without practical plan; now it chafed him to feel that she might not be ready to follow his lead in joyful appreciation of his purpose. The realisation fanned his passion, strong as it was already.

"Are you thinking of yourself or of me?" he asked bitterly.

"Oh, how can you!" she cried, pained beyond further expression of reproach; yet she understood that his cruelty arose from the very strength of his feelings, and while with feminine instinct she divined his love-selfishness she cared for him none the less.

"Look here," she said firmly, "I belong to Robert. You belong to India. And we've both got to remember——"

"Oh, I know what you're going to say—remember our duty. Duty be damned," he retorted, beside himself. "You can't love me as I love you or you wouldn't talk like this. What do I matter to India?—I'm only a fly on the wheel. What do you matter to Crayfield, any more than if you were—well, a pearl necklace, for instance!"

"I know my value to Robert exactly," she told him with a wry little smile; "but I married him for what he could give me, and he has given it. I don't agree with you as to your value to India. India depends

on men like you; and if you are flies on the wheel, the wheel wouldn't go round without you."

It was true, and he knew it. All the same, he felt that Stella meant more to him now than his duty to India and all his ambition.

"We belong to each other, and to no one and nothing else," he maintained doggedly. "You can't go on living with one man when you know you love another. It's not right."

"Perhaps not, from one point of view, but I don't take that view. We can't think of ourselves. I shall ask Robert to let me go to the Cuthells, even if I have to pretend to be ill. If he won't let me go, then you must apply for leave, or get away somehow from Rassih."

"Stella, are you made of stone?" He drew his chair nearer to hers, laid his hand on her arm, rejoiced as he felt how her pulses responded to his touch. "Think what the separation would mean. We could go to England," he urged. "I would work for you, slave for you, darling."

"And that would mean your giving up India?"

"Not necessarily. I can take leave on urgent private affairs for six months. Furlough is due to me, too, but that takes time to arrange. I could get it tacked on afterwards, and then—then we could be married and come out together. It would all have blown over."

But even as he spoke there came visions, strive as he would to ignore them, of obscure little stations, promotion tardy, other men passing over his head for the rest of his service.

"And suppose Robert wouldn't—supposing we couldn't be married?"

This possibility had not entered his mind. He hesitated, then added quickly: "He couldn't be such a brute! If he was, I'd retire; we would live quietly somewhere out of the world, just for each other. Don't you care for me enough to take the risk?"

She did not answer, because she feared if she spoke at the moment she might burst into tears. He misunderstood her silence.

"I tell you," he went on impetuously, "I tell you again, as I told you yesterday morning, that nothing matters to me in the world but your love. It means more to me than my work and my aims, my life itself. Without you, success in the Service would simply be dust and ashes. I'd sooner live on a desert island with you than be Viceroy of India. Are you afraid to trust yourself to me?"

She struggled for self-control. His eyes were pleading, his face looked drawn. She longed to give in, to tell him she asked nothing better than to be with him for always, at whatever the price or the punishment. Yet surrender at best must mean greater sacrifice for Philip than she on her side could offer, and she meant to hold out even should it all end in a parting that left Philip with the impression that she valued her worldly well-being beyond his love. Her thoughts were simple, direct; but she felt if she tried to explain, urged the fact that she cared too much for him to become a drag on his life, would find compensation in knowing he was free to go forward untrammelled, she might only appear to be

setting herself up on a pedestal of self-righteousness at his expense. She temporised.

"Let us think it over," she entreated; "let us give ourselves time, by one of us going away, at any rate for the present."

"Time would make no difference as far as *I* am concerned. It would only be the same thing all over again! But if you think it would help you to forget, then of course I must agree."

"Oh, it isn't that," she protested, tortured beyond endurance. She cast about in her mind for further argument. "Do you remember one day when I told you how I regretted I wasn't a man to do what little I could for India, and you said my chance might come?"

"Oh, you sweet, silly child!" he scoffed. "Do you honestly imagine that India would crumble to pieces without me?" He laughed as he seized her in his arms, kissing her madly. She wrenched herself free, stood swaying, confused, overcome with the force of his passion, the thrill of his embrace. Then came the sound of Robert's returning footsteps, and she held up a warning hand, bent over the bowl of flowers on the table as though to rearrange them. Philip moved his chair back to its original position and busied himself with his cigarette case, but he could have wished that Crayfield had surprised them; then there would have been an end to all subterfuge, of all Stella's doubts and scruples. He felt a cur because he did not stand up and proclaim the truth there and then, so setting her free from the onus of decision.

"That's done!" said Robert. "Now, when Sher Singh comes back, perhaps we shall get to the bottom of this pearl business. Are you ready, Flint? We ought to be off again if we're to see to that farther chain of villages. It looks like more rain, thank goodness. Stella, you'd better go and lie down; you look like a ghost."

"I feel like one, too," she answered, and as he turned to leave the room she followed him quickly. "Robert, wait a moment." She caught his elbow. "Come into my room, I want to speak to you."

He acquiesced, though with impatience. "Well, what is it?"

"I must have a change," she began volubly; "I can't stand the heat any longer. I believe I shall die if I don't get away from it. You can't think how awful I feel."

He looked at her in astonishment, with which concern, vexation, and a shade of indefinite suspicion were mingled.

"You want to go away? You know perfectly well I can't ask for leave with all this distress in the district, even if the rains break freely in the next few days."

"But I could go alone," she pleaded. "Mrs. Cuthell would have me, I know she would. I'd come down again directly I felt better. It isn't gaiety I want, only to feel better."

"Antonio must come and have a look at you. Perhaps——"

"No, no," cried Stella. "It's not that!" She almost wished it were, that she might have stronger

excuse for flight. The idea even crossed her mind to feign doubt in order to gain her purpose, and though she dismissed it with horror she clung ignominiously to the straw that floated detached from definite deception.

"If I could only get strong," she hinted shamefacedly, "it might make a difference. I feel such a wreck, Robert. I'm so sorry, but I can't help it."

It was all true, she told herself wildly. She did feel a wreck; she was sure she would be seriously ill if she stayed on at Rassih, unless—unless Philip would go instead.

"Well, wait till this evening," said Robert, "and we'll see. I must be off now; Flint is waiting, and we've a long afternoon's work to get through." He advised her to rest, and kissed her in kindly, if perfunctory, farewell.

When he had gone, Philip with him, a hot muggy silence descended upon the premises. The servants went off to their quarters in the compound for the customary midday meal and sleep, save for a couple of peons on duty who snoozed in the front veranda, and the ever present shift of punkah pullers. Since the downpour of rain the west wind had ceased to roar and rage over the land; Nature seemed motionless, as though waiting in patient expectance for the swollen clouds to discharge their burden of water.

Stella, torn with emotion, wandered from room to room, unable to rest, Jacob pattering at her heels. She found herself longing for the peace and security of The Chestnuts, for the home of her childhood that in her young arrogance she had despised, rebelling

against its restrictions. Now she visualised the old house and garden bathed in serene summer sunlight, the village, the common, the cornfields; remembered with regret the small vexations, her ignorant, stupid little grievances that were as grains of sand compared with the mountain of trouble before her. She wept with self-pity, with terror of the future. The word "disgrace" rang in her ears, disgrace for herself and for Philip unless she had strength to resist him; and yet if she remained steadfast, what of the long empty years that lay ahead like a limitless desert? Even to face them with courage — for Philip, that Philip might go forward unshackled by fetters riveted in shame—seemed more than she had power to undertake. Could she tell Robert the truth, entreat him to help her, to let her leave Rassih for a time? No; such a scheme was unworkable. She knew him well enough to feel sure she might as well throw in her lot with Philip at once. Robert would never forgive, understand; and could she think that he might, she herself had rendered such a course impossible by her way of deception—allowing him to believe that she loved him, leading him to assume that she but tolerated Philip's companionship. Even from Philip there was no hope for such help as would support her in her struggle.

The room grew dark. At first she fancied that the gloom must be of her own mental making; then came a dull roll of thunder, followed by a close, threatening pause, full of portent. A little breeze rose and whispered through the house, stirring the curtains, like a scout feeling its way in advance of the attack

to come. She went out on the balcony, to see huge purple clouds, rent with forked lightning, rolling up rapidly from the horizon. The air was full of dust; birds were wheeling and crying against the sinister background. Jacob cowered, trembling, at her feet. A drop of rain fell like a bullet on the balustrade, another, and another. . . . In a few seconds a rush of wind drove her indoors, and with a mighty tumult of sound the rain fell in one solid, relentless sheet as if giant buckets were being emptied from above.

Stella threw herself on a sofa in the drawing-room, Jacob cuddled at her side. She ceased to think, was conscious only of the noise and the darkness that seemed to continue for hours, until, exhausted body and soul, she fell asleep.

Robert and Philip returned late in the evening, drenched. Robert, despite his wetting, was cheerful over the fact that, to all appearances, the rains had arrived to stay, though he grumbled because there was no further news of the necklace, and because Sher Singh had not yet arrived. Philip looked white and ill as they sat down to a belated dinner; once or twice he shivered, and he ate little or nothing. Stella watched him in anxious concern; a return of malaria was only to be expected after his long ride in wet clothes. By this time the downpour had slackened, and from without came the clamour of frogs—"Croak, croak, co-ax, co-ax"—in regular rhythmical chorus. The temperature had fallen, punkahs were almost unwelcome; the reaction was depressing. A damp mist crept into the great room; little black insects gathered

in multitudes around the lamps on the walls; lizards darted among them, enjoying the feast they provided. Stella could have cried with dejection, and, to add to it all, as they passed from the dining-room they encountered Sher Singh, salaaming, full of important concern. He had heard of the robbery, understood why he had been recalled, though he explained humbly that in any case it had been his intention to return next morning. The Sahib's telegram had, of course, hastened his departure. The matter of the necklace, he added miserably, was to him terrible, a disgrace to the household; he, the slave of the Sahib and Memsahib, would neither sleep nor eat till the thief was discovered, the pearls restored; until then his face, as chief servant, was blackened. . . . He showed signs of prostrating himself at his master's feet, and Robert, to escape a scene, bade him go and do his best to clear up the mystery, thus tactfully dismissing him.

Philip, with Stella's warning in his mind, had regarded the man closely during this interview. Stella was right; he felt certain Sher Singh was up to no good, that his leave had been part of some treacherous scheme, and he made up his mind to remain in the house till he knew what it was. If Sher Singh meant to make mischief, to arouse his master's suspicions in regard to his mistress, he, Philip, must be at hand to see Stella through; it might even bring matters to a crisis, help to decide for them both. He had a presentiment that, whatever Sher Singh's intention, something would happen that night, and,

ill as he felt, he assumed liveliness, made conversation with Crayfield, discussing results should the rain prove to be merely local, the effect that severe distress would have on the various areas under their control. Robert, lured from the subject of the pearls, talked freely, held forth on his experiences in a famine that had occurred early in his own service, and how abominably he had been treated, his efforts ignored by the Government.

"It's always been the same," he complained; "the fellows who do the real work may die in harness, literally driven to death, and get no credit; while those who have done nothing but talk and write, are smothered in decorations and shoved up to the top of the tree. Thank goodness I could retire to-morrow, if I felt so inclined, and snap my fingers at the lot of them."

He cited instances of his contemporaries in the Service, who, without a quarter of his own claim to distinction, had been given the C.I.E. and the K.C.I.E., the C.S.I. and the K.C.S.I., until Stella felt that the alphabet, as well as the Government, must be to blame for failing to recognise Robert's meritorious achievements; and her memory turned to the evening at The Chestnuts when she had wondered if he were sore because no Order had yet been bestowed upon him. Since then she had not thought of it, but now she suspected that the omission rankled in his mind, and her sympathy with his possible disappointment went out to him. She knew how he worked, and even if he worked without enthusiasm, surely that was even more to his credit than

if he were spurred by romantic inspiration? She wished he had confided in her, allowed her to share his feelings; but she knew that to him she was of small account intellectually; the disparity of years stood between them. And even had he admitted her to his confidence, what could she have done save endeavour to console him with understanding? It was not as if he were young, like Philip, with the world of India before him.

But the very fact of this disadvantage helped her determination to fight against her love for Philip. For Robert's sake in the present she could only refrain from adding to his sense of failure in life; for Philip's sake in the future she must stick to her post; and for her own sake—well, at least she could feel she was doing right, whatever Philip, in his desperation, might argue. Peace of mind would come, though at best a dull, empty peace, with the knowledge that she had nothing to fear, that she had brought trouble to no one. Then again round and round swung the question on which hung her chief difficulty: if Robert refused to let her go to the Cuthells—if Philip could not, or would not, get leave or a transfer from Rassih, what was she to do? In such a situation she saw little chance of true peace of mind. It would mean one continual effort to avoid Philip by every manœuvre in her power, to pretend, pretend, pretend, both to him and to Robert.

She sank into a sort of lethargy; her brain felt numbed, and the voices of the two men sounded hardly nearer than the ceaseless song of the frogs outside. A figure came into the room, stood for a

moment by Robert. It was Sher Singh—always Sher Singh! How she loathed the creature. Robert rose, and went away; Sher Singh too. She roused herself with an effort; Philip was asking her something:

"Did you hear what he said? Were you asleep?"

"No, I don't think so; I don't know." She sat upright, passed her hand over her eyes. "What did he say?"

"He said the pearls had been found."

So the tiresome pearls had been found! It seemed to Stella that the news had barely reached her understanding before Robert was back. He crossed the room reflectively, with measured tread, the pearls gleaming white in his big hand; the contrast struck Philip as painfully symbolical: just as pure and as perfect was his dear love in the man's coarse keeping.

Crayfield paused, dandling the pearls. When he spoke he addressed himself to Flint in a voice that was devoid of all expression. He said: "My wife's necklace was found in your room."

For a moment Philip gazed at him dumbfounded. Then, as with the shock of a flashlight, he understood. Sher Singh! Sher Singh had either put the necklace in his room, or pretended to find it there, not with the object of fastening false suspicion of theft upon anyone, but in order to compromise the mistress he so hated. What a fool as well as a devil the fellow must be! How could he imagine that such an obvious piece of spite was likely to succeed? Yet, what was the meaning of Colonel Crayfield's curious attitude? Was it possible that he believed—— Swiftly Flint's mind pounced on the opportunity: he might

refrain from defence, allow the "find" to speak for itself. But what about Stella? Would she realise the situation? Already she had risen, trembling and white with indignation.

"Robert! What do you mean? Surely you don't—you *can't* suggest that *Mr. Flint* took the pearls?"

Philip glanced at her hopelessly. Her simplicity was almost unbelievable; her innocence, all too obvious, had lost them their chance of freedom.

"Philip!" she cried involuntarily, and made a quick movement towards him. Crayfield moved also, just a couple of interceptory steps. He laughed, and put the pearls in his pocket.

"That's all I wanted to know," he said coolly, an ugly glint in his eyes. "Out you go, my boy! You didn't steal the pearls, of course; but you've been doing your damnedest to steal something else, and you haven't succeeded."

"You may think what you like!" interposed Philip hotly; but he felt he was blustering, that Colonel Crayfield, his senior in years and authority, had the whip hand of him, perceiving the truth. The trap had been cleverly laid.

"Thank you! Then I like to think this: you have been making love to my wife under my roof, taking advantage of her youth and inexperience; but mercifully you've been caught in time. Now go and pack your belongings and clear out. Consider yourself on leave. I want no scandal. Slink off—quick! You young hound!"

Stella had sunk into a chair. Her husband stood

before her; Philip could not see her face. He was racked with humiliation, with helpless rage; his pride, his self-respect lay in the dust, since he could not but recognise the fundamental justice of his chief's accusation. . . . Must he leave Stella without comfort, without reassurance of his fealty and love? Driven to desperation, he tried to push Crayfield aside; he might as well have endeavoured to move a mountain.

"Stella!" he called hoarsely; but for answer to his cry came only the sound of stifled, terrified sobbing.

CHAPTER XIV

Colonel Crayfield stood silent, motionless, until all sound of Philip Flint's exit had ceased. When, with a dazed effort, Stella looked up at her husband, his face reminded her dimly of some monster depicted on a Chinese screen. She held her breath, half expecting him to kill her there and then. Instead, to her amazement, he merely spoke to her as he might have spoken to an unruly child caught in some act of mischief, ordered her to her room, watched her grimly as she rose in dumb obedience.

Passing through the hall, she encountered Philip's old servant; he looked harassed, bewildered, as he salaamed. "It is the Sahib's order," he said in querulous resentment, "that his belongings be taken back to the Rest House at once! Even but now hath he departed there himself, and on foot! Yacoub-dog also." Clearly the old man expected some explanation. What could she say? Only that she supposed the Sahib's orders must be obeyed. She left him standing puzzled, indignant, in the doorway of the bedroom his master had occupied.

For days afterwards Stella felt, as it were, "put into the corner" by Robert. This attitude on his part, humiliating to her though it was, came as a partial relief; it gave her time to revive in a sense from the shock she had suffered. The interval of disgrace, despite its ignominy, rested her nerves, and helped

her to face Robert's forgiveness, which, when it pleased him to extend it, was far more unbearable than his displeasure. She dared make no further appeal for permission to join Mrs. Cuthell; she knew well enough, if she did so, what Robert would say: that she was not to be trusted! Her very pride gave her strength to conceal, often to overcome, her physical distress during the unhealthy, wearisome months that followed before the cold season set in.

The monsoon weakened, failed; the heat was diabolical, mosquitoes were a torment, the days and nights seemed endless, and there was always Sher Singh, watchful, malignant. Champa had begged leave to resign from the Memsahib's service once the disturbance caused by the episode of the pearls had subsided in the compound; she did so with crocodile tears and feeble excuses. The truth was, that having been frightened out of her senses, she felt unable to recover her pretentious position in the Rassih establishment. So Champa departed without great loss of dignity, and her place was taken by a humble person whose name her new mistress did not even trouble to inquire, since the word "Ayah" seemed to be the beginning and the end of her obtuse personality.

Stella's spirit supported her, but nothing could deaden the heartache; there was nothing to relieve the burden of her time, nothing to ease the struggle to control her ever-growing abhorrence of Robert and his demands on her outward docility.

All that winter they toured in tents. The scarcity,

though not so severe in the Rassih division as in other adjacent areas, meant much extra work for the Commissioner, and occasionally Stella would be left in the camp for two or three days while Robert and his satellites went off on side inspections by rail. At such times Robert would commandeer some lady, whose husband happened to be on duty with him, to keep Mrs. Crayfield company. Stella would have preferred to be alone; it seemed to her that she had lost the capacity for making friends; but at least Robert was absent, at least she was freed from the strain of his presence, and for that she gave thanks while enduring the companionship of an unwelcome visitor who she knew was an unconscious watch-dog.

Only these little periods of peace, the tonic of the cold-weather climate, the frequent change of locality kept her going; but when they returned to Rassih her vitality sank, the effort to keep up appearances became harder, and she felt that the fight could not continue much longer. Constant attacks of low fever laid hold of her, and Robert was annoyed because she could not eat, could not sleep, because, he declared, she would make no attempt to exert herself, because the medicines prescribed by Dr. Antonio did her no good.

Gradually his impatience changed to indifference. He ceased to scold and advise, or to insist on her company; paid little attention to her. She knew he was bored with her sickliness, her altered appearance. She only prayed that he might send her home.

Relief came from quite an unexpected quarter.

The English mail arrived one evening while Robert was out riding: the usual consignment of papers for him—he seldom received anything else beyond business communications—a letter for Stella from Aunt Augusta, and one with an Indian postmark; the handwriting on this envelope stirred her memory, but she laid it aside till she had read Aunt Augusta's letter. The little chronicles from The Chestnuts were precious to her now. She read greedily of small happenings, how old Betty had been so troubled with rheumatism that further help was needed from the village; how grandmamma had dropped her handkerchief in church last Sunday, and little Isaac Orchard, the blacksmith's son, had picked it up and run after them, and grandmamma had given him a penny. (Stella could see her bestowing the reward with the air of a potentate; doubtless they had talked of the incident all through luncheon.) The potatoes were disappointing: so many of them were diseased this year. Canon and Mrs. Grass had been to tea; poor Mrs. Grass's health did not improve, but she had been none the worse for the outing. Aunt Ellen had embroidered such a *very* pretty cushion cover as a birthday present for grandmamma, and so on. The letter concluded with the usual messages from all at The Chestnuts to dear Stella and Robert, and the hope that they were both keeping fairly well.

Stella then opened the other envelope. Maud Matthews! What a surprise! Only once had Maud written since her arrival in India as a bride, and Stella had long since assumed that she had dropped out of

Maud's thoughts. The letter was like a refreshing little breeze to its dejected recipient:

"My dear Stella,—

"I know I'm a pigandadevil (that's Dick's word) not to have written all this time, but unless I make myself answer a letter the moment it comes I somehow get so that I simply can't answer it at all. Anyway, *you'll* have to answer *this*, because I want to know if I can break my journey up country at Rassih with you and your good man. Don't you hate that expression? In most cases I'm sure 'bad man' would be nearer the mark. I've got a baby—such a grand excuse for going to the hills! And I've taken a small house at Surima, a long journey from here, but it's such a jolly place, and no one bothers what you do. My old Dick will be as right as rain by himself, and he'll come up on leave later on. Rassih isn't much out of my way, and I must stop somewhere to take breath. It would be such fun to meet again and have a talk and a laugh. Are you going away for the hot weather, or are you one of those saintly wives who never desert their husbands? Have you got a baby? If not, don't; they are a scourge, though I admit mine might be worse now he's here, and I refrain from infanticide because he does me such credit. He's not a bit like Dick. Now may we come? Send me a wire, because we must start in a few days, and, anyway, wiring is easier than writing a letter!

"Ever yours,

"Maud Matthews."

Stella dropped the letter in her lap, and sighed with mingled hope and foreboding. Would Robert consent to her friend's visit? What a blessed break it would make in the monotony of her days. Her courage rose. She decided to send the telegram now, before Robert's return. He could hardly insist that she should cancel it, once it had gone; whereas, if she waited to ask his permission he might raise objections, though what reason could he advance for refusing to receive Mrs. Matthews and her baby for a few days on their way to the hills?

Hastily she wrote out a telegram, called a peon, and dispatched him with it to the post office. Mercifully, Sher Singh was not lurking about, else the message would certainly have been withheld until his master's return; such was her bondage to the servant who ruled!

Nervously she told her husband, when he came back, what she had done, handed him Maud's letter, her heart beating fast.

"What a flibbertigibbet!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "I suppose we must put up with the infliction, as you say you have wired already."

"I thought you wouldn't mind," said Stella apologetically. "She's an old friend of mine, and I should like to see her again."

"Very well then, let her come. Perhaps it will be an incentive to you to pull yourself together and behave a little less like a wet rag!"

Maud arrived with mountains of luggage, the baby, and a retinue of servants, and from that moment the house seemed transformed. Robert succumbed

reluctantly to the gay company of his guest, who took it for granted that he was overjoyed to receive her; she chattered and chaffed and looked charming—such a contrast to her frail hostess!

It was not until the morning after her arrival, when Robert was safely at work, that Maud started a confidential conversation with Stella, who hitherto had avoided a tête-à-tête. She shrank from any admission of her unhappiness and ill-health; but Maud, with all her fortunate lot in life, had spotted at once that something was wrong, and by degrees she succeeded in worming the truth from the unwilling Stella, who proved as wax in her ruthless hands. Very soon she knew all concerning the unsuitable marriage, the trouble with Sher Singh, the affair with Philip Flint and the incident of the pearls, Stella's pitiful condition of body and mind. The two sat talking in low voices throughout the morning, while it pleased "young Richard," as his mother called him, to sleep soundly.

"Something must be done," pronounced Maud; "you'll snuff out if you go on like this!"

"I shouldn't care," said Stella hopelessly.

"Nonsense! What you want is a good rousing change away from this beastly house and every one in it. That bearer alone would give me the creeps if I stayed here much longer. Once you were away from it all you'd get over this business with Philip Flint. I should have forgotten Dick if I hadn't married him. Now I'll tell you what: I mean to make up to your old Robert-the-devil and canoodle him into letting you come to Surima with me."

Stella gave an incredulous laugh. "You don't know him. He will never let me go!"

"I know *men* pretty well, my dear, and after all he is a man, as well as a brute—very often the same thing, but not always. You can pretend to be jealous, if you like; it might help matters on!"

"I can't pretend any more about anything!" Stella had small hope that Maud would succeed in her project; if she did it would be little short of a miracle.

"Very well, then; lie low and leave it all to me Here he comes, my lord the elephant. How the time has flown without him."

She turned to greet Robert as he came into the room. "Well, here you are at last, just in time to save us from dying of dullness. Have you been working very hard? If so, how do you manage to look as if you had just come out of a band-box? You ought to be made to give up the secret!"

Robert regarded her with amused indulgence. "How do you manage to talk such nonsense and look so fetching?" he retorted.

"Do I look fetching?" She rose and shook her skirts. "Oh! I've lost my shoe!" She hopped, and held forth a slim little foot in an open-work stocking. "There it is, under that chair."

With a grunt, Robert stooped and retrieved the shoe. "What an absurdity!" he exclaimed, balancing it on the palm of his hand.

She clutched his arm to steady herself. "Don't make my shoe look silly! I daren't put my foot

down; I might tread on a pin or something and get 'mortification-set-in' or whatever it is."

He pushed her into a chair. "Now then, 'hold up' and be shod." He pressed her ankle with his finger and thumb. "Quite clean: no splint, not a wind-gall!" He took his time fitting on the truant shoe.

Stella observed the scene with excited wonder. Robert was flirting! She could hardly credit her senses. His small eyes twinkled wickedly. Maud looked like a mischievous sprite. Was it possible that by this means Maud might really succeed in her object? As long as she did succeed Stella did not care what means she employed.

They went in to breakfast. Maud sparkled and bantered, and talked tactfully of food, praised the curry and the cutlets, exchanged reminiscences with her host concerning the cooking at various restaurants in London, besought Colonel Crayfield to take her for a ride that evening, and, to Stella's secret entertainment, Robert agreed at once, though she knew he had arranged to play tennis. For her part she had planned a drive alone with Maud; instead, she found herself placed in charge of "young Richard." Later on she and the baby, with his ayah, watched the pair ride away, Maud mounted on the grey stud-bred that by now had become a sober and tractable member of the stable.

"Gee-gee!" quoth the ayah importantly to the bundle in her arms; and young Richard, aged eight or nine months, leapt and squealed with delight. He was a handsome, good-tempered child; to Stella he

appeared singularly intelligent, and she felt almost happy that afternoon wandering about the garden with him and his attendants, the ayah garrulous and consequential, swinging her voluminous skirts, a staid bearer carrying a white umbrella and a rattle. . . . Yet Stella did not envy Maud her motherhood, no thrill of maternal longing possessed her as she took the child in her arms to show him the birds and the squirrels; she was only thankful there was no "young Robert" to bind her more closely to the man she had come to loathe. . . . She wondered how Maud was progressing with her subtle scheme, wondered with a gleam of hope if, after all, Robert might not be glad rather than otherwise to get rid of her, glad to take advantage of Maud's persuasions while pretending to grant his engaging guest the favour she asked of him. Had Maud already broached the subject during their ride . . . ?

Could she have known it, Maud was making headway, craftily, with Robert while Stella was amusing young Richard.

"Isn't it funny?" said Mrs. Matthews as she and Colonel Crayfield walked their horses along the canal bank after a brisk canter. "I feel as if I had known you for years! I think Stella is very much to be envied."

"Do you?" He grinned complacently. "Tell me why you think so."

Maud sighed. "It must be so nice to have a husband one can lean on, who doesn't expect his wife to do all the planning and thinking. Now with me and Dick *I* have to take all the responsibility about

everything. I daresay I seem very frivolous and feather-headed, but I flatter myself I have my share of common sense. It was dreadful having to decide about leaving Dick for the hot weather. Of course, I was torn in two—duty, you know, and all that—but there was the child to be considered as well as my own health. I am sure if you thought Stella ought to go to the hills, instead of saying, like Dick, 'do as you think best,' you would settle it off-hand, not leave the decision to her. Wouldn't you?"

"Stella has no common sense," he said evasively, frowning.

Mrs. Matthews gazed thoughtfully ahead. "I know what you mean. Some people take a long time to grow up. Of course Stella is awfully good and sweet, but as a companion for a man of the world——"

He glanced at her in quick suspicion, and she divined that he was questioning how much, if anything, Stella had confided to her.

"I can't quite make her out," Maud continued confidentially. "She seems to me so listless, not interested in anything. I tried my utmost to get her to talk this morning, but it was no use. What is the matter with her, Colonel Crayfield?"

"She's not well, and she will make no sort of effort to rouse herself." He paused, then added violently: "She's just a little fool!"

"Well, when you think of her upbringing what can you expect? But it seems rather hard on you! I wonder if I could help in any way——"

"What could you do? If a man of my age is weak

enough to marry a child, he must put up with the consequences."

"Perhaps if she could have a change; is there no one you could send her to?"

"Only a woman who wouldn't know how to look after her. She'd very soon get into mischief."

"Oh! surely Stella would never do that!"

His silence was significant. For the moment Mrs. Matthews accepted it. She appeared plunged in reflection. Presently she said: "Couldn't you get leave yourself and take her away?"

"Just now it's quite impossible."

"I understand. Later on do you think you could manage it?"

"Perhaps. But I've no use for hill stations."

"Rotten places," said Maud. "I know I shall be bored to death at Surima."

"Not likely," scoffed Robert. "*You!*"

Mrs. Matthews felt she had perhaps made a false step. "Oh! I've no doubt I shall have a good time after a fashion. I always make the most of circumstances, and luckily I have a head if I haven't much heart! I can take care of myself anywhere. Look here," she went on boldly, "would you think of entrusting Stella to me? I should like a companion, and there's plenty of room in the house I have taken. Directly you can get leave you could join us for a bit, and that would be ripping!"

He hesitated, gnawed his lip, said grumpily: "It's rather a tall order!"

"Why? It would do Stella all the good in the world. I'm certain she'd come back a different

creature. You'd never repent it. What could be worse for you than the silly state she has got into?"

"That's true," he admitted; and she played on his vanity and his self-commiseration until he had promised to think over her proposal.

Maud returned from the ride in the sure and certain hope that she had triumphed.

PART II

CHAPTER I

A WEAK monsoon, following on scarcity already serious; consequent failure of autumn and spring crops; and famine, dread word, echoed over the half of India.

Now the hot weather had set in unusually, as it were, malevolently early. Areas none too fertile at the best of times reverted to parched deserts, wells and river-beds dried, canals shrank, strained to the limit of inadequate supply. People and beasts were dying of disease and starvation, and officials, both European and Indian, fought one of Nature's remedies for over-population with every ounce of human energy.

Philip Flint sat in his office-tent weary, over-taxed, writing with a sort of dogged persistence. His papers were powdered with dust, the ink evaporated, thickened in the pot; his eyes smarted and his bones ached. For months he had been touring through stricken districts, his camp a kind of flying column, inspecting and organising relief works, famine camps, poor-houses, hospitals. Out at dawn, often not home till dusk, he would have to sit up half the night to wrestle with reports and returns, accounts and statistics; so sparing neither body nor brain on behalf of the miserable multitude that crawled and craved, hunger-smitten, homeless, his heart sore with the sight of skeleton children, exhausted mothers, piteous old people. . . .

Early yesterday he had arrived at a remote point far from town or railway, where earthworks had lately been started for the relief of an area comprising numerous scattered villages, never prosperous, now on the verge of absolute ruin. Transport was the chief difficulty; it must be some time before the light railway that was being laid from the nearest junction could be completed. Cartage and bullocks were scarce, and though a certain stock of food and necessaries were already to hand, there were many to be fed, clothed, accommodated, and the numbers increased day and night. The hospital sheds, in charge of a native doctor, were filling rapidly; further medical help would be needed. Flint had been thankful to hear from his senior subordinate that recently a Zenana Mission lady had arrived with a fair supply of comforts. He was familiar with the invaluable work of such women; it was beyond all praise. As yet he had not had the time to visit the little encampment pointed out to him on the far side of the works; all day he had been too busy superintending transport, checking stores of grain, considering applications for financial assistance, while it was his duty, as well, to detect and guard against imposition, to sift demands, even to appear callous, that the ready cunning of those who sought to benefit by help intended for their suffering brethren might be frustrated. Only this afternoon he had been nearly outdone by an old fellow who presented himself among a gang of emaciated villagers clamouring that he had no plough-bullocks, no seed, nothing—that he and his descendants were ruined. . . . At first Flint had listened with sympathy until

something in the demeanour of the bystanders aroused his suspicions; a few of the less distressed members of the crowd were covertly smiling as though in amused admiration of the patriarch's powers of persuasion, and a little adroit inquiry disclosed the fact that the supplicant was none other than the money-lender of the village whence they had all come.

In contrast with this example of rascality a man of low caste in obvious need had stoutly refused assistance other than in the form of a loan from the Government to be repaid with reasonable interest when times should improve. So it had gone on from the first—patience and pride, heroic endurance, a fine sense of fair play, in company with avarice, fraud, evil intention. Ignorance, stupidity, superstition had to be reckoned with as well, allowed for; the problems were endless, for, while the people must be tended and fed, money could not be wasted or misapplied.

At last Flint laid down his pen and leaned back in his chair to relax muscles and mind. Had he been called upon to define his condition, he would have summed it up simply in the one word "cooked." He lit a cigarette and allowed his thoughts liberty, it was seldom he permitted them to dwell upon the past, but to-night he was too tired for self-discipline. On leaving Rassih he had volunteered for famine work as a desperate antidote to his sickness of heart and spirit; this in face of the knowledge that the decision had probably cost him a chance of important advancement, but the future for him had been shorn of attraction, and the sight of wretchedness and want, his passionate pity for the helpless, the strain and the

stress of the work had, he knew, preserved him from despair as no official promotion could have preserved him at the time.

All the same Stella had never been far from his memory, and to-night she seemed to him painfully near. Again he went over that last scene in the Commissioner's house, saw Crayfield standing grim and contemptuous in the big drawing-room, Stella weeping and helpless, himself worsted, ashamed, without honest claim to defence. *"Slink, you young hound!"* The sentence forced itself backwards and forwards through his brain, hitting his pride each time like a shameful blow. . . . In his weak selfishness what misery he had brought upon himself and the woman he loved, would never cease to love. Where was she now? What was she doing? He pictured her at the piano accompanying the self-satisfied vocal performance of her husband! He visioned the light on her hair, the delicate outline of her neck, and he writhed as the memory tortured his heart. What devilish fate had taken him to Rassih! Yet he had a feeling that in any case he and Stella must ultimately have met, and that some day, somehow, they must meet again. The refrain of a cheaply sentimental little ballad he had heard her sing came back to him: "Some day, some day, some day, I shall meet you"—he could almost hear the clear, chorister-like voice. . . . Of a certainty the day would come, and then? He smiled with a sweet bitterness as he recalled her faith in his work, in his usefulness to India; she had said: "Without men like you the wheel would not go round." Well, he was doing his best in his own way

to act up to her trust; and for her sake he would stick to the wheel, humbly, unswervingly, though the zest and the savour of ambition had gone, wiped out by unlawful love. . . .

A cold muzzle crept into his hand that hung listless at his side—Jacob, diffident, sensitive, asking attention; Jacob had loved her too, with all his tender dog-heart. On that terrible evening Jacob had sat shivering on the edge of her skirt, conscious of trouble, until he followed his miserable master from the room.

Suddenly he became aware that someone was speaking; he looked up to see an apologetic peon standing at his elbow.

"Sahib, there is a memsahib without."

For one wild second he fancied it might be Stella, his mind was so full of her. Had she fled to him, sure of his love and protection, willing to give herself into his care? He felt as though aroused from a distressing dream, perhaps to find that all the pain and the longing had passed——

"A memsahib is without," repeated the peon resentfully. "She will not depart, though this slave hath told her that the sahib is busy."

Flint rose mechanically, his reason flouting the fancy that Stella could be "the memsahib without." A tall figure was framed in the doorway of the tent.

"Yes?" he said with tentative politeness.

"I won't keep you long." The voice was brisk and high. "I've come from the Zenana Mission camp, where I'm helping Miss Abigail on behalf of the Charitable Relief Fund Committee."

"Indeed!" murmured Philip, inwardly apprehensive. The Charitable Relief Fund Committee sometimes added heavily to his work and responsibilities, admirable though its purpose, welcome though its help.

"Yes, I've been hoping all day to get hold of you, but you were always somewhere else."

"Please come in." He glanced around dubiously, for the interior of the tent seemed hardly fit for the reception of a lady; files and papers heaped on the table, on the chairs, even on the floor; dust, cigarette ends, everywhere; camp equipage, boxes, books and boots, in a hopeless jumble.

"I'm afraid it's all very untidy," he added as he cleared a seat.

The brisk, high voice responded: "What *does* it matter! Who can hope to be tidy in these horrible circumstances. I feel very untidy myself."

She did not look it, whatever she felt. Here was no typical Zenana Mission female, but a long-limbed, well-built girl, garbed in a neat holland frock, brown shoes, wash-leather gloves, and an obviously English felt hat, bound with a blue puggaree, that proclaimed itself "Indispensable for travel in the East." All very plain and serviceable, but to an experienced eye undoubtedly expensive.

To Flint's astonishment she took off her hat, carelessly, as any man might have done, and dropped it beside her chair. He saw that her hair was cropped short, a thick mop of curling, fox-coloured hair; that her eyes, clear and shining, were grey (and truculent), that her freckled irregular nose and rather large mouth

had a certain charm. He felt faintly scandalised when she proceeded to help herself calmly to a cigarette from his box, lighting it with an accustomed air. Smoking among ladies was not general in India at that period. Seated, she crossed her legs, showing slim ankles and neatly-turned calves in brown stockings.

"Well," she began, "I thought someone ought to come and tell you that a lot of people have bolted from the relief works."

"Yes, I know——"

"And you don't care, I suppose," she interrupted.

He stared at her, puzzled; why this unprovoked attack? "We shall get them back. Perhaps you don't realise the reason——"

Again she broke in: "It's because you officials inspire no trust!"

What on earth was the matter with the girl—was she a lunatic?

"I'm afraid superstition is more to blame," he told her patiently. "Some mischief-maker among them has probably started the report that they are all to be murdered in order to extract oil from their bodies for medicinal purposes."

"What nonsense!"

He wondered if she meant the report, or his explanation.

"Of course it's nonsense. But that kind of thing will happen, even nowadays. Superstition dies hard in India. Coolies often bolt wholesale when some important work has to be started, because in old times, before our occupation of the country, a human victim

was nearly always buried beneath the foundations of any big building as a sop to the gods!"

He could see she did not believe him. His anger rose. "How long have you been out here?" he inquired.

"Quite long enough to discover how little the people are considered. I think the Government ought to be hanged. Not a penny will you spend—on this famine, for example—without exacting the uttermost farthing in return. You make these wretched creatures work for a mere pittance, you force them into poor-houses when you know it lowers their self-respect, and many of them die because they would rather die than accept relief in the way you administer it!" She paused, breathless.

"And how do you propose it should be administered—indiscriminately, and no questions asked? That would be rather hard on the taxpayers, and bad for the people themselves. I think even the Charitable Relief Fund Committee would hardly work on those lines."

She ignored his argument. "It's appalling," she went on heatedly, "to find how badly private charity is needed. I came out a few weeks ago to see what I could do to help, and I'm horrified. Where would all these unfortunate people be without the Charitable Relief Fund!"

"If it comes to that," he retorted, "where would they be without all the Government machinery that is kept ready to be set going directly scarcity becomes serious—the means of transport, the linking up with unaffected Provinces, the loans for seed and cattle.

Good Heavens, you can have no conception of the work."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he stopped her with a peremptory gesture, and continued quickly: "Private charity is of the utmost value in a calamity of this kind, and we are only too thankful for it, especially in remote regions, but personal sacrifice and hard work isn't entirely confined to the non-official. The help would be simply a drop in the ocean if the way hadn't been prepared. Try to be just, Miss——"

He waited interrogatively.

"Baker—Dorothy Baker"—she waved her cigarette. "You may have heard of my father, Lord Redgate?"

So here was the solution of the girl's extraordinary antagonism. She was the daughter of a new-made nobleman whose apparent object in life, to judge by his speeches, was to disparage British administration in India, to discount the long years of effort and experience, to undermine confidence in honest rule. No doubt such an undertaking engendered a nice sense of superiority and importance that blinded its owner to the truth, if his eyes were not shut deliberately. This obtrusive young woman was clearly imbued with her parent's particular form of conceit. He would not trouble to wrangle with her further.

"Oh! yes," he said indifferently; "we have all heard of your father. Did he object to your coming out here alone?"

"Object? Of course not. He believes in the freedom of the individual. And if he had objected I

should be here all the same. I always do as I please."

"And it pleased you to come out and do famine work. How kind of you!"

She shot him a glance of contemptuous suspicion. He understood all that the glance implied; as a British official in India he was an enemy of the people, a bureaucrat, battening on the revenue wrung from a poverty-stricken land, one of the guilty gang that kept Indians from the possession of their country. Yet she seemed in no hurry to quit the presence of such a tyrant and oppressor; evidently she found his chair comfortable, was enjoying his cigarettes, and perhaps she was not altogether averse to a little change of companionship? It was conceivable that the privilege of constant intercourse with her Zenana colleague might have become a bit of a strain. For himself her young presence, despite her antagonism, was in a measure welcome after his fit of depression. Physically she was an attractive creature, and her naïve self-importance, her impulsive opinions, suited her vigorous personality. Jacob, the little traitor, was already making advances to the visitor. She snapped her finger and thumb in response.

"I like dogs," she said, as though it were a form of weakness that redounded to her credit. "And they always love me!"

"And horses?"

"Oh! yes, rather! I wanted to buy a pony, but Miss Abigail seemed to think it would not be quite in keeping with the work we are doing, and that the money had better be spent in some other direction.

We get about in a bullock shigram, not a very comfortable or rapid mode of progression, but comfort and convenience don't count, of course. Personally, I'm not sure that we oughtn't to walk everywhere."

"It would perhaps be a waste of energy and time," suggested Philip.

"But think of the example! You, I suppose, ride or drive everywhere?"

"I couldn't get through my work if I didn't; it would entail endless delay in the administration of relief. I'm practically single-handed in this circle. For example, to-morrow morning I have to cover, roughly speaking, about fifteen miles before breakfast. How would you like to come with me? Have you a saddle—I could mount you."

Obviously the offer tempted her. "Yes, I brought out my saddle. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing——"

"It would give you a further opportunity of condemning our iniquitous methods," said Philip meekly.

She let the thrust pass. "All right; what time do you start?"

"About six. Is that too early for you?"

"Don't talk rot! Send the gee to our camp, and I'll be ready."

"Good! Now can I offer you any refreshment—will you have a cup of tea or coffee, or," he ventured, in view of the cigarettes, "a peg?"

"Nothing, thank you." She rose a little reluctantly. "Now I must get back——"

"Have you a lantern?" he inquired, for the sudden Indian dusk had descended.

She looked out of the tent. "No, I never thought of it, but I can find my way all right."

"I'll come with you——"

She protested. He paid no attention; and presently they were stumbling along side by side in the wake of a peon who marched ahead swinging a hurricane lantern, and banging a staff on the ground to scare possible snakes that at this season, waking from their winter sleep, were apt to lie curled in the warm dust, a danger to pedestrians.

"Are you married?" she asked him suddenly.

"No, I am a lone being, and I think it is just as well."

"Why?"

"If I had a wife and children it would only mean separation sooner or later. Children must be sent home after a certain age, not only on account of health and education but because the moral atmosphere is bad for them, and to my mind the children should be considered before the husband."

"How do you mean—the moral atmosphere?" she asked argumentatively. "I have always understood that natives were excellent with children, kind and patient and faithful."

"They are all that, bless them!" he said, "but their ideas of discipline are not quite the same as our own. To tell lies is merely a matter of self-protection, and, all wrong as it may seem, they knuckle under to English children, let them have their own way, and encourage them indirectly to be arrogant and self-indulgent, taking a sort of pride in their faults! At least that is what my married friends tell me."

"Then the parents are to blame!" declared Miss Baker severely, "for leaving their children to the care of servants while they amuse themselves flirting and dancing and playing games! You don't accuse this Mr. Kipling everybody talks about of writing what is not true, I conclude?"

"Have you never read a preface to one of his books in which he particularly warns his readers not to judge of the dirt of a room by the sweepings in a corner? Parents in India are much the same as parents in England, and parents in England haven't to contend with exile and climate and long separations"—he paused, feeling he was wasting his breath, and was ashamed of a spiteful little sense of satisfaction when at that moment she tripped and clung to him to save herself a fall.

"Now, if I hadn't been with you"—he could not help reminding her.

"I should have come a cropper, and probably been none the worse," she replied ungratefully. "What were we saying? Oh! about parents in India. Why do you go into the Indian services at all then? You know what to expect!"

"Why do we go into the army and the navy—the worst paid professions on earth? It's an instinct, thank goodness, and with it goes the love of justice and fair play towards the weak and unprotected. It's the keynote of our power all the world over."

"Oh! you are hopeless!" cried Miss Baker. "I call it love of conquest, and position, and power!"

"Call it what you like, don't you shut your eyes to the results—anyway, out here."

"The results! Poverty and famine, and a refusal to allow the people to govern themselves, refusal to mix with them socially——"

"Wait a moment," he interrupted, angry with himself because he could not keep silence. "Which in your opinion should govern—the Hindus or the Mohammedans?"

"Of course the Hindus. India is *their* country."

"The Mohammedans would have something to say to that; or, rather, it would be deeds not words. And how about other nations who would all like to exploit India? We could hardly be expected to keep up an army and a navy to prevent them from doing so if we had no stake in the country."

"Go on," she urged sarcastically. "I am listening."

"When India is in a position to protect herself from internal quarrels and foreign invasion it will be time enough for us to clear out; and as far as social questions go I can assure you they are not at all anxious to mix with us. Their customs and traditions are all opposed to ours. . . . But it would take weeks to give you even the most superficial idea of the difficulties, and at the end I suppose you wouldn't believe me."

"Oh! I've heard it all over and over again from hide-bound old generals and retired civilians at home, the same time-worn arguments that really mean nothing. However, I am quite ready to believe that you, personally, are well disposed towards the people, and that you do your best for them in spite of the trammels of red tape!"

He refrained from an amused expression of gratitude. After all, the girl was actuated by benevolent intention, however befogged, and she was enduring discomforts, almost hardship, in her self-imposed philanthropy, as he realised when they arrived at the Zenana Mission encampment. What wretched little tents, badly pitched, ill-lighted, with a clamouring throng of distressful humanity pressing up to the very flaps. From the tent in the centre came the sound of singing; a familiar hymn tune.

"There now!" exclaimed Miss Baker in vexation. "I'm late for evening prayers. I'm an atheist myself, but I try to fit in with my chief's customs."

"I hope for her sake that you spare her argument on the subject of religion at least!" said Flint with a magnanimous laugh, as he held her hand in farewell. "We shall meet again to-morrow morning."

He watched her disappear into the principal tent, and turned his steps back to his camp, his feelings ajar. Why would these good folk from home interfere in what they knew nothing about. What mischief they made, all unwittingly for the most part, adding to the difficulties already so great for those who were working under conditions but dimly understood, even by the faction who trusted their own countrymen, and did not regard the English official as a thief and a bully and a time server. . . .

In spite of Miss Baker's tiresome attitude, he looked forward to seeing her the following morning. She was a stimulating companion and engaging in her way with her boyish figure, her eager grey eyes, her expressive, irregular features. . . . In time, if they

met often enough, they might become friends—an armed friendship, perhaps, but none the less interesting for that. . . . What would Stella have thought of her, Stella with her passionate perception of the work that England had done in the past, was doing in the present, would continue to do as long as she was permitted, with honest endeavour, for India. He was conscious of a revival of his old ambitions as he plodded over the uneven track, and far into the night he sat writing, reading, spurred, refreshed as well, by the unexpected diversion of Miss Baker's visit and her violent opinions.

CHAPTER II

Miss Baker could ride; not a doubt about that, thought Philip. She sat squarely in her saddle, hands down, right shoulder well back; her habit skirt was very short, she wore a stiff white shirt and collar, and a linen coat. The whole effect was neat and smart and pleasing. How she chattered as they rode over the bare, dusty plain! Some of her theories rather startled her cavalier; for example, she considered it immoral of people to have large families unless they could afford to educate the children highly—this with reference to some friends of Miss Abigail's who had spent the previous day in the Zenana Mission camp on their way to the nearest station, a missionary with his spouse and offspring.

"Did you tell them so?" asked Flint with amused curiosity.

"Yes, of course I did; and I asked them how they were going to provide for three boys and two girls in the future."

"What did they say?"

"They said the Lord would provide, and that the mission granted an extra allowance for each child!"

"Then you can hardly blame them, I suppose."

"I think that clergymen, and doctors, and schoolmasters ought all to be celibates. They should be able to give their whole attention to their work unhampered by domestic affairs."

"That is expecting a good deal, surely?"

"I don't see it. Marriage isn't everything. Now if I were a man I should never marry."

"And not being a man?"

"Oh, I dare say I shall marry some day, but my husband would have to share my views on all the important questions of the day, and believe absolutely in the equality of the sexes. At present I hate men."

"Oh, dear!"

"Yes, that is partly why I came out to India, to escape"—she checked herself as though she had been on the brink of a confidence, then added—"to escape worrying attentions."

"Then it was not entirely devotion to the down-trodden masses of this miserable country?" he asked slyly.

She flushed and said with lofty evasion: "I felt India needed me, I wanted to *help* India. I don't mean to stay out here permanently, of course; only till I have collected enough information and proof to open the eyes of the electors at home. I shall write a book. I think I shall call it 'What I saw in India.'"

"Why not 'The Evil English in the East,'" he suggested amiably. "An alliterative title is always arresting. The one you have thought of might be regarded as almost too uncommon?"

She laughed as though unable to help herself. At least, it seemed she had some saving sense of humour.

"How silly you are! You don't take life seriously at all!"

"Perhaps not;" he spoke carelessly, but he felt

he could have shaken Miss Baker—conceited, self-satisfied monkey!—puffed up with her superficial views, untouched as she was by trouble or experience, so ready to blame and condemn where she did not understand. Of what avail to argue with her, why should he bother about what she thought, if she ever really thought at all! Help India, indeed! Who was she to help or even hinder the great machinery of Eastern administration, and as to her independence of sex—some day she would learn that she was but flying in the face of nature, and he hoped she would suffer for it.

"We must get on," he said; and as they put their horses into a gallop he found himself admiring the way in which she handled the mount he had lent her, a high-spirited young chestnut, unaccustomed to a side-saddle, yet aware that liberties could not be taken with his present rider; Flint noted the strong turn of her wrist, the firmness of her long, slim foot in the stirrup, the poise of her straight young figure. It crossed his mind, but for her wild ideas what a wife she would make for a man whose life was all action; ready for emergencies and discomforts, willing to rough it, daring, unafraid. She ought to marry a colonial, go with him to Canada, Australia, his equal in physical endurance, and disregard of convention, yet mastered by his manhood, the mother of a string of strong children whether they could be educated highly or not! An unworthy temptation assailed him; as they arrived at an outstanding relief camp he helped her from her saddle with a bold tenderness that held an element

of revenge, held her hand a little longer than was strictly necessary, looked into her fine grey eyes, of purpose intently. He could not tell if she recognised the unspoken signal; if she did she ignored it, and presently they were deep in the object of their expedition, tramping over hot, hard ground, watching the slow movements of the ragged crowd—women and children breaking up dry clumps of soil, carrying it on their heads in baskets; men and boys digging, scraping. It was like an ants' nest without the energy and diligence of those insects, for the workers were weak and apathetic, only looking forward, as was natural, to the distribution of food and money that was to follow.

Flint was on the look out for bullying among the overseers, for petty pilfering on the part of the distributors of supplies; he listened patiently to complaints, investigated grievances, and entirely forgot Miss Baker except when she asked questions or got in his way. She followed him for the most part silently, unobtrusively, and the morning was well advanced before it suddenly struck him that his companion must be feeling the need of refreshment. They were a long way from headquarters, far from any place of accommodation; the sun was overpowering; he noted that she looked tired and hot, he himself felt fagged. His inspection was not yet completed. Never mind, he could return this evening and finish it at the price of a little extra pressure and exertion.

He took out his watch. "Look here," he said penitently, "you must be pretty well done. Let us

get back as quick as we can and have a good breakfast in my camp."

She hesitated; if he could have seen into her mind she was thinking of the kind of meal she might expect on her return to Miss Abigail's tents (boiled rice and pulse, and perhaps a stew that had seen service already). She was despising herself because the temptation was strong to accept the invitation, and not altogether on account of the better fare.

"Wouldn't it be proper for you to breakfast with me alone?" he asked provocatively.

"I wasn't thinking of that!" she exclaimed with scorn, and added, not quite honestly: "I was only wondering if Miss Abigail would be keeping breakfast waiting for me——" She knew perfectly well that Miss Abigail would not.

"She knows you are with me, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes——"

"Then why worry? Come along."

On their way back she asked him: "You do this kind of thing every day?"

"Certainly. It's my job."

"But you are paid for it," she remarked vindictively.

"One must live, though perhaps in my case you don't see the necessity. Anyway I get no extra pay, so it's not for pure love of gain!"

"How do you mean? Weren't you ordered to do the work?"

"As it happens, no. I volunteered."

"Then where would you have been if you hadn't?"

"At Simla perhaps, or somewhere away from the famine area in my own province."

"Then you don't belong to this part?"

"No, I've been lent."

"At your own request?"

"Haven't I just said so?"

For a space she was silent. Then she said grudgingly: "After all, it's nothing so very wonderful!"

"I quite agree. I lay no claim to doing anything wonderful. Now *you,* on the other hand, have left a comfortable home and quite a different kind of life at, I am sure, an enormous sacrifice, to come out and *help India!*"

She winced obviously, and he enjoyed her discomfiture; yet his conscience smote him, for he queried inwardly if he would have been here at all but for the fateful happenings at Rassih! At the same time he did not intend to enlighten Miss Baker on that point. For the sake of other Englishmen who had given their services in this terrible affliction without reserve, better let her believe that he had been actuated solely by a stern sense of duty. The result of his work was the same, he had foregone advancement, was out of the running, over-working himself without hope of reward in the future. If he were not on the spot someone else would be; the whole thing was general, not individual. England was doing her duty by India comprehensively, he was but a fly on the wheel, and he neither desired nor expected special recognition. But he felt entitled to exact just approbation, on these grounds, from

this arrogant girl who, in her way, represented a certain section of public opinion at home.

Save for a few desultory remarks on the scenery she said little more as they urged their horses onward, but he noted a new diffidence in her attitude; she was less aggressive, a little softer, and despite his contempt for her outlook on Indian affairs he could not forbear to take advantage of her weakening. He talked seriously, earnestly, of the problems and peoples of the country, set forth their helpless dependence on disinterested rule, defended British enterprise; and to his satisfaction she listened. Through it all he watched her clever, expressive face; how she showed her feelings!—an undisciplined nature. One moment he saw hesitation, doubt of her own judgment; the next incredulity, impatience of his arguments; again a little light of enthusiasm in her eyes, albeit reluctant, as he spoke of the long line of heroes who had made India what she was—prosperous, peaceful, secure, in so far as such a vast and complex country could be secure, unless danger was fostered from within. . . . She had a good heart if her brain was ill-trained, falsely developed; he wondered what her childhood had been like, how she had been brought up, and later, as they were seated at breakfast in his tent, he asked her if she had ever been at school.

"Oh, yes, the ordinary thing, a rotten place at Brighton—all music and French and dancing. You see, we are very rich people! My father is a big manufacturer, he began life with the proverbial half-crown in his pocket. We are not blue-blooded

at all, I can assure you! My mother was the daughter of a small artisan. To the day of her death, a few years ago, she hated late dinner, and was afraid of the servants. I firmly believe she died, poor dear, because she had to live in an atmosphere that was too much for her. She couldn't stand the strain when my father bought a place in the country and a house in London, and she was obliged to entertain and meet people she had never been accustomed to. She was a victim to the intermediate stage. In time, of course, all the big places will be in the hands of go-ahead men like the pater who have made their own fortunes, and the idle rich will disappear."

"What about the descendants of the go-ahead men?" put in Philip. "Have you any brothers?"

"Yes, two——"

"And are they working for their livings?"

"Well," she moved uneasily, "one is in the Guards and the other is still at Oxford——"

"And you were sent to an expensive school for young ladies at Brighton? In a few generations, I suppose, you will be ousted from your big place in your turn!"

"But we know how to take care of our money. It won't be squandered in racing and cards and dissolute living."

"How do you know? Doesn't it depend on the individual? There are plenty of pedigree landlords who are models of stewardship and right thinking, doing their duty by the country and their responsibilities, just as there are self-made men who are

selfish and hard and tyrannical. It isn't entirely a question of birth and heredity. I am of opinion that if a man with an inherited position and property is false to his trust he should be deprived of it by law, but when he does his best he should be protected from attacks that are prompted more often by jealousy than by concern for the poor. What do the majority of self-made men go for, once they are 'made'? Titles and 'places.' Isn't it true?"

The girl crumbled the toast on her plate with restless fingers. "Everything is all wrong," she burst out presently. "My father won't see that we ought to keep only just enough for ourselves and share the rest with the people who have helped him to make his money. Why should we have an estate in the country and a sort of palace in London, while our workmen are living in slums! It's abominable. I admit we are as bad in our way as the families that can trace their descent for hundreds of years and look upon their lands and their tenants as just mediums of supply for their luxuries and amusements. It will always be the same, I suppose!"

"It has been the same since the beginning of the world," said Flint, "each man for himself. It's human nature. Have some more coffee?"

"Yes, please. It's delicious. Miss Abigail seems to think it's wrong to have decent food. Why she and her kind aren't all dead from poisoning I can't imagine."

"The survival of the fittest, perhaps."

"Their hearts and their souls are bound up in the work, and their stomachs don't seem to matter.

I feel I am horribly material and greedy. Perhaps I haven't a soul or a heart, only a stomach!"

"In that case you wouldn't be out here," he suggested for her comfort, "giving your time and your money in a good cause."

"I don't want to take credit for that. I am beginning to see that I may have come out with a mistaken motive, not so much to do my little bit over the famine as to find fault with what seemed to me an autocratic mode of government. If all Indian officials were like you——"

"Like me!" Philip gave a bitter little laugh. "I may also have had my motive in doing famine work apart from the welfare of the people. We are all actuated by motives, principally selfish and private."

She finished her coffee. "Anyway," she said, rising, "I am glad we have met, though you have upset my ideas and made me feel horrid when I thought I was such an angel of mercy and reform! I am afraid I am very conceited, but it is so nice to feel superior and generous!"

He saw tears in her eyes, and he took her outstretched hand in true comradeship, ashamed of his attempt that morning to play upon her natural instincts. "Don't bother about motives," he said in friendly understanding, "go on with your blessed work. We are all doing what we can for the people of this great old country, and believe me they aren't insensible to our efforts. They know in their hearts. Some day they will stand by us and give all they can in recognition of what we have done in the past for

them. The test is bound to come, and whoever gets the credit doesn't matter. The result will be our reward. The only fear is that all the drudgery and the sacrifice may be undone, go for nothing, wrecked by a clique composed of self-seekers, encouraged by those who have quite other ends to gain."

They left the tent together. He helped her into her saddle, and watched her ride off attended by the syce who would bring back the chestnut; the Honourable Dorothy Baker—born of the people, reared as an aristocrat, who had set out to patronise those among whom such an anomaly was impossible, unthinkable! How invaluable might be the zeal of her kind rightly inspired and directed in the cause of India, could they only divest themselves of the very arrogance they were so anxious to impute to the men who were guarding the safety of the brightest jewel in the crown of England. . . .

For the next few hours Flint buried himself in papers. The heat and the dust and the flies were distracting; he found it hard to fix his mind on his work, and his thoughts wandered perversely. He remembered he had not yet written his weekly letter to his mother; it had been so difficult to write naturally after the upheaval at Rassih, he had felt such a hypocrite—allowing his parents to infer that in volunteering for famine work he had been prompted solely by a sense of duty; yet to tell them the truth was beyond him. He pictured the old people in their comfortable South Kensington home; his father always busy over local charities and municipal boards and councils. Major-General Sir

Philip Flint had not shed his energy and public spirit with his retirement from Indian service. Dear old chap!—white haired, courtly, ever ready to listen when people came to him with grievances, real or imaginary; and the mater, with her large circle of old Indian friends, her bazaars, and her tea parties, and the never ending stream of visitors she was always so ready to "put up," people just arrived from India, old friends settled in the country who were intent on a week's shopping; hospitality was in her bones. She would have loved to harbour grandchildren. Philip knew how she regretted that his sister was not the wife of an Indian civilian, or an Indian Army man, though her marriage to a prominent specialist in Harley Street had been highly satisfactory, as Lady Flint admitted; of course, she would say, it was a comfort to feel that Grace was so well provided for, but Grace lived in such a different world from their own—a world composed of public people, people connected with the stage, and literature, and art, politics, the law; no dull old Generals, or members of the Indian Council, and so on for Grace! and there were no babies to come and spend the day with Granny, to be taken to the seaside, to be fussed over and spoiled. . . . Her great hope now, as she told him in her letters, was that Philip would marry some dear girl whose family, like his own, had served the Indian Government for generations, so that they would all understand each other and carry on the old traditions comfortably, friends in every sense. Grace's friends and in-laws were a sort of nervous terror to poor Lady Flint. What

would be her feelings, questioned her son as he sat dreaming of his mother in his tent, so far away from her, could she know the truth, could she realise that her hopes of such a daughter-in-law would never be fulfilled so long as Stella Crayfield claimed his heart; and that would be for always—till he died. . . .

The pen dropped from his fingers, he leaned back in his chair, drowsy, inert. Jacob was snoring in a corner; from without came the ceaseless murmur of the concourse awaiting his decisions, and on his table lay such piles of papers still to be examined. From sheer weariness he fell asleep and dreamed of Stella, of their hopeless love, and mingled with it all was the memory of Dorothy Baker, vigorous, purposeful, arresting. He seemed to be standing between the two girls at the base of a long flight of steps; they were urging him upward, but he felt tired, slack-limbed, heavy-hearted; he wanted to rest. The steps were so steep, high as a pyramid of Egypt; he could not see the top, it was lost in a haze of luminous light. "Go on, go on," they were saying; they were holding each other's hands, as it seemed to him conspiring to urge him forward. "Go on; they have all gone up in their turn—look! some are already at the top, some have died on the way, some have lost everything, but never mind—go on, go on. . . ."

And he struggled, lifting his feet to the steps that were rough and burning, to find himself in the midst of a ghostly pageant. Near him was a little old man with dim tragic eyes, dressed in a blue coat and knee breeches. Where had he seen him before? There was a world of sorrow, of bitter disappointment in

the small, bowed figure, so pathetic, yet breathing a spirit of wisdom and untiring tenacity. "Who are you, little old man, tell me who you are?" Philip heard himself asking. And faintly, as though borne on the hot west wind, came the whisper of a name—was it Warren Hastings? A wrinkled yellow hand was raised, pointing upward. . . . A few more steps; now he was pushing through a motley host all strangely garbed. Some of them held up a Cross and a Book, some displayed tokens of trade; there were women with empty arms, weeping for the husbands and the children they had lost, yet glorying in the sacrifice; and a band of people, half English half Indian, who had given their lives in the cause of their great two parents. They were lining the ladder, the stiff, steep ladder. . . . Someone stepped out from the crowd and laid an encouraging hand on his arm: "Go on, my boy, fight! There is nothing like fighting!" and to his horror Philip saw that the speaker's throat was cut, that he held in his hand a little penknife and a pen, just a quill pen. . . . Who was it? Who was it had ended his life in a moment of mad impulse, the fine brain snapping with the strain and the fervour of work and responsibility? Ah, now he remembered; it was Clive, great Clive! so noble, so strong in his influence and judgment, in his making of Indian history. Always a fighter, even from his schoolboy days. . . . What a pitiful end to a brave career! and yet what matter when the task had been accomplished, victories won; at least he had but sought peace and repose in his own way and at his own time. The hand that held the fatal

little knife was also waving him upward, pointing to the top. . . . With him were others, ghosts from the past, whispering names, magical names, that lived not only in the memories of those of their own race and colour but in the hearts of the people they had served and fought for, and saved; also great fighters with dusky faces and flashing eyes, faithful supporters, fearless and fierce, without whose allegiance all the strife and the sacrifice might have been useless; one in spirit with their leaders, East and West bound together by one high aim—that of justice and right. . . . "Don't fail us," they chorused. "Keep going, give of your best as we did before you!" And they waved their swords and their scimitars, and the Cross, driving him upward, till at the summit he saw a speck of light that, as he climbed, grew in brilliance, took shape, and formed itself into letters of fire: *Star of India.*"

He cried: "What can I do? I am only one of a crowd, a fly on the wheel!" The sound of his own voice wakened him; he stood up, still dazed, haunted by the fantastic dream. Jacob was snoring in the corner; hoarse voices murmured outside; a swirl of hot dust and wind shook the tent. Mechanically Flint sorted his papers, put on his hat, and went forth into the hot stillness of the evening.

CHAPTER III

As was only to be expected, Miss Baker had brought a photographic outfit with her to the Zenana Mission camp. Flint came across her next evening endeavouring to snap a little bevy of "famine wallahs," new arrivals, squatting with their cooking vessels till their turn for attention should come. There seemed to be no extreme cases among them, and though all were obviously weary, in need of food, none were too exhausted to exhibit lively alarm at sight of the Feringhee woman who waved her hands and pointed her black box at them. They hid their faces, turned their backs, jabbered expostulations, finally rose and scattered like so many frightened fowls, leaving their utensils behind them.

Philip halted, just for a moment. He was in a hurry, on his way to take over a large consignment of incoming supplies.

"Illustrations for a book, I suppose?" he said, smiling at her annoyance with the fleeing little crowd; of course she was ignorant of the belief among the rustic population that when a picture is taken a portion of the spirit goes with it, causing calamity. "Take photographs when they're not looking," he advised.

She turned the camera on to him. "Let me take you. At anyrate you can stand still, I imagine. I must take something. I don't know how many plates

I haven't wasted over these people. What on earth is the matter with them?"

"I can't stop to explain or to stand still at present. A lot of stuff is arriving and I must go and receive it."

"Come and have tea with us to-morrow, and I'll take you then. Miss Abigail told me to ask you, if you came along. She's over there."

Miss Baker indicated a temporary enclosure in the near distance, where he could see a short, substantial figure trundling about amidst a gathering of women and children.

"Thanks, I'd like to come. I ought to have paid my respects before now." He cantered off, leaving Miss Baker preparing to photograph the abandoned pots and pans.

When the time came for him to fulfil the engagement for the following afternoon he was surprised to realise how eagerly he had looked forward to it. Work and anxiety had slackened a little with the arrival of fresh supplies, and he felt almost light-hearted as he bathed and got into clean flannels; for the first time since he had left Rassih he caught himself singing in his bath. He walked the good half-mile that lay between his own encampment and that of the Zenana Mission lady, Jacob at his heels, well groomed like his master; they were a good-looking English pair.

Miss Baker was outside the living tent photographing Laban, the native Bible teacher, who posed in mingled pride and uneasiness—proud to be taken in his black alpaca coat and pork-pie cap, a shiny-bound Testament in one hand, a bulging umbrella in the other; uneasy because deep down in his mind, for all

his enlightenment, there lurked the same fear that had brought about the flight of the famine wallahs.

"One minute," Miss Baker called out to the approaching visitor; a click, and she raised her head triumphantly. "Thank you, Mr. Laban. That ought to be very good. You shall have some copies to send to your home, and I'll put your picture in my book."

"Mr. Laban" salaamed, and withdrew hurriedly. Then it was Flint's turn. He submitted while Miss Baker took him seated, standing, with Jacob, without Jacob; she fetched a larger camera from her own tent, and talked of head-and-shoulders, profile, full, and three-quarter face portraits. She commanded him to take off his hat.

"But I shall get sunstroke, and you would have to nurse me," he quibbled, rather bored with the performance, though Miss Baker's engrossment amused him, and she was a pleasant vision in her blue linen frock, a bright flush on her cheeks, her ruddy hair curling about her neck and ears and forehead beneath what might have been a boy's straw hat.

"Oh! Miss Abigail would do that!" she assured him. "I hate nursing. I know nothing about it. Come into the shade of the trees behind the tents."

The little camp was pitched close to a couple of mango trees, probably the sole survivors of a once flourishing grove, but as the space surrounding their trunks had been appropriated by the servants as an open-air kitchen, shared by the shigram bullocks, a goat and her kids, a collection of fowls, and a few sprawling children, Flint hesitated, compromised.

"Why not the big peepul tree further back?" he suggested.

The tree in question stood solitary and majestic between the camp and the adjacent village, a landmark in the wide flatness, mightier, far more ancient than the mango trees. No doubt it had once shaded a temple long since ruined and decayed.

"But it's such a way off," objected Miss Baker. "We'd better have tea first. The light will be better afterwards, too."

Miss Abigail settled the question for the moment. She emerged from the living tent, a stout, ungainly body, grey-haired, middle-aged, browned by exposure and innumerable hot weathers. But there was character in the blunt, homely features, courage in the small light eyes; a woman to be trusted and esteemed in spite of her unfortunate appearance. Philip liked her instinctively. She reminded him of a cottage loaf, rather overbaked, all knobs and crusty protuberances, spreading and wholesome.

Miss Baker introduced them with a proprietary air that included them both, and they entered the tent where tea was laid carelessly on an unsteady camp table. The spout of the teapot was broken, the plates were all chips and cracks, there was a pat of Danish butter, goat's milk, some slabs of thick toast, and a tin of jam roughly opened with some blunt implement.

He glanced at Miss Baker, saw her nose wrinkle ever so slightly, as though in suppressed distaste. Was she contrasting the spectacle with afternoon tea in "the sort of palace" in London, and "the place in the country"?

Nevertheless, it was a cheerful little meal. They laughed and talked. Flint described to Miss Abigail the scene he had witnessed the previous evening when the "famine wallahs" had refused to be photographed. He explained the reason to Miss Baker, who said it was, of course, the fault of the Government that such silly ideas should still be general. The people should have been educated out of them by this time.

"What about the freedom of the individual?" he inquired. "Why should they be photographed if they dislike it, for whatever reason?"

"That's a smack at me, I suppose," said Miss Baker huffily.

"Not a very hard smack, any way." He looked at her with a friendly smile, and, mollified, she smiled back at him. It turned out that Miss Abigail knew the Beards at Rassih, though she had seen nothing of them for years. She asked many questions about them and their work, few of which Flint was able to answer, indeed he could hardly remember what the Beards were like. They talked "shop," discussed the works, and the shelters, and the hospital, agreed how lucky it was that the well in the village was holding out satisfactorily so far; Miss Abigail was certain she had seen a small cloud in the distance that morning, and was confident that if they all prayed hard enough rain would fall within a reasonable time. Flint said politely that he hoped so indeed; Miss Baker tried not to look scornful.

Between them they emptied the teapot and finished the toast; and Miss Baker observed that if Mr. Flint

insisted on being photographed under the peepul tree they had better be up and doing. Miss Abigail was persuaded to accompany them, though she openly grudged the time, and they plodded through the dust of the rough road that led past the camp, and the great tree, on to the village beyond.

"I hate peepul trees," said Miss Abigail, with an odd little shudder; "the leaves never seem to be still, even when there is hardly a breath of wind to stir them. Look at them, hark at them now!"

The flat spade-shaped leaves trembled in the sultry evening heat; the faint, continuous rustle sounded like whispering voices. No wonder Philip reflected that spirits were believed by the people to dwell in the branches. Miss Abigail glanced disgustedly at the rough, time-worn stones scattered about its roots; some bore traces of carving, unmistakable figures of idols, others showed sacred symbols, defaced, indistinct, all remnants of a former shrine or temple. Bits of rag had been hung by some passing worshipper to the lower twigs of the tree; it looked, as Miss Baker remarked, as though someone had flown through the branches, leaving scraps of their clothing behind them.

"The rags are hung there as a protection against evil spirits," said Flint; "all the superstitions connected with the peepul tree would fill a good-sized volume. Look at that bit of thread wound round the trunk; somebody has lately been propitiating the tree by walking round it and winding the thread as they went. The peepul is the home of the Hindu Trinity, as well as of mischievous devils!"

"There's a nasty atmosphere of idolatry that doesn't suit me at all," proclaimed Miss Abigail. "It's high time a Christian was buried here to counteract all the wickedness this horrid old tree must have witnessed in its time!" She smiled at her own little pleasantry.

Philip laughed. "And then the grave would become a sort of shrine in its turn, and the people would make offerings to it, and hang more rags than ever in the branches above it!"

Miss Baker turned to Miss Abigail. "But you wouldn't like to be buried here, would you?" she inquired, aghast.

"I don't care where I am buried when my time comes, but here for choice if I thought it would do any good." Miss Abigail dived into a capacious pocket, pulled out a pair of folding scissors, and calmly proceeded to cut the thread that encircled the tree trunk. "There! That's my protest against the devil and all his bad works."

To the embarrassment of her companions she then knelt down on the roots and in a loud voice said a vigorous prayer. What a curious contrast she presented to her surroundings—an almost grotesque figure in an attitude of supplication with her dust-coloured gown flowing about her, and an unlovely sun hat on the back of her head. Jacob sniffed at the soles of her boots that protruded from beneath her skirts. The prayer finished, she rose without a trace of self-consciousness, brushed the dust from her knees, and requested Miss Baker to make haste over the photography as her help would soon be needed in

the camp with the evening work. Then she stumped off towards the tents.

"Did you ever!" exclaimed Miss Baker, looking after the retreating figure. "Now I suppose something awful will happen to us all. I feel quite nervous. Hark at the leaves. There really might be something moving about in the branches!"

"Shall we hang up a piece of rag?" suggested Philip chaffingly.

Half in earnest, she took out her handkerchief, a white wisp with a pretty coloured border.

"It's a pity to tear that," said Philip.

"A sacrifice!" she replied; and before he could stop her she had torn it in two. "Now, you hang up one bit and I'll hang up the other. What would Miss Abigail say! For goodness' sake don't tell her."

Laughing, they hitched the bits of cambric to the twigs above their heads, and Miss Baker picked up her camera.

"Now, then, take off your hat, and let's hope the spirits won't spoil my pictures."

CHAPTER IV

THREE days later cholera broke out on the relief works.

During the afternoon a woman had arrived with a dead, monkey-like infant in her arms and a dilapidated little family clinging to her skirts, only herself to curl up and die in the heartbreaking fashion common to the stricken native, haplessly, silently, without struggle or protest. Before dawn the demon let loose among a weakened multitude had begun to pick off victims, here in a triangle, there in a semicircle, again in a neat zigzag, as if with mathematical malice and caprice. . . .

Flint, roused at daybreak by the fatal news, worked for hours in conjunction with the medical officer, dosing, segregating, attending to the removal of the dead, striving to stem the panic that might drive the people to scatter over the countryside, spreading the disease. Then, after a hasty breakfast, he rode off to Miss Abigail's camp with the intention of urging Miss Baker to seek some other field of activity in view of the present danger. He encountered Laban, the Bible teacher, nervous and voluble, outside the principal tent, and was informed by him that the two ladies had gone forth the previous morning to visit a small outpost in connection with the Mission some few miles distant, having arranged to remain there for the night. They had not yet returned.

"This is a very bad sickness!" added Laban. "How shall we all escape with our lives—and my grandmother dying in Cawnpur, calling, and calling for my presence!"

"Meantime," suggested Philip, left cold in regard to the grandmother, "hadn't you better go and help with the children whose parents are dying or dead? There's a good supply of tinned milk, and it's got to be served out quickly."

The teacher's flabby brown face paled to a sickly hue. He swallowed hard, and his lips moved. Philip fancied he caught the word "photograph." Probably the wretched Laban, unable to divest himself of the fear that a portion of his spirit had already gone from him with the taking of his picture, felt he was doomed unless he could flee to his home.

"Look here, old chap," went on Flint, prompted by sympathetic understanding, "aren't you a soldier of Christ, ready to fight for your own people?"

He asked the question with a certain grim amusement at his own recourse to missionary diction; but presently the amusement turned to respectful admiration as Laban shivered, hesitated, then, without further ado or explanation, marched off in the direction of the camp.

Inwardly Flint salaamed to the shambling figure of this "soldier of Christ." He said to himself: "By Jove, that's a feather in the missionary cap!"

He had turned his horse's head, when the sight of a little cloud of dust in the distance caused him to halt, and out of the dust-cloud appeared a hooded bullock

cart, crawling, bumping over the rough ground at a snail's pace. He waited, wondering how the energetic Miss Baker could bear with such leisurely travel, since patience was hardly one of her gifts. The bullocks must have taken hours covering the distance. When at last the vehicle pulled up at the camp a flushed and fuming young person scrambled from beneath the hood.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Miss Baker, shaking the dust from her clothes and stretching her cramped limbs. "Hullo, Mr. Flint!" Her face brightened at sight of him. "What do you want?"

"Good morning, had a nice drive?" He smiled at the grimace that was her answer, and dismounted.

"I want to speak to Miss Abigail." It had occurred to him that Miss Abigail's powers of persuasion might prove more effective than his own in the matter of counselling change of air for Miss Baker, the girl being more or less under her authority. Truth to tell, he rather shrank, with masculine cowardice, from a task that he anticipated would involve something of a scene.

"Here she is, then—what's left of her after that awful journey!" There was plenty of Miss Abigail left; the stout, square figure clambered backwards from the cart, and he took comfort from the fat, kindly face and brave little eyes. He drew her aside.

"Bad news," he said; "we've got cholera in the works!"

"Ah! so it has come! I don't know which I have been dreading most, that or smallpox. Well, we must all turn to and do our best."

"But what about Miss Baker? She oughtn't to be allowed to stay——"

"Why not? She has put her hand to the plough, and surely you don't expect her to turn back?"

He felt annoyed, disconcerted. "It's all right for us," he deprecated, "but Miss Baker should go."

"Well then, you had better tell her to do so. Frankly I shan't be sorry if she takes your advice. Amateurs are more bother than they are worth in my line of work. But *I* can't urge her to bolt!"

"Don't you feel responsible for her safety? A girl out here alone——"

"She came of her own free will, as far as I know, and was handed over to me by the Charitable Relief Fund Committee. I didn't ask for her. But now she's here I consider she should take the rough with the smooth like the rest of us. I will leave you to settle the question."

With a nod and an exasperating smile of unsympathetic comprehension Miss Abigail stumped off to her tent.

Miss Baker approached. "What has happened?" she asked. "You look peevish. Don't cry!"

"I've been telling Miss Abigail she ought to send you away at once."

"And are you so miserable because she has refused or consented? Why should I be sent away? What have I done?"

"Cholera has started among the people," he told her bluntly, "and you must pack up and be off, unless you want to add to our anxieties!"

Could he believe his eyes? Instead of the torrent of lofty expostulation he had expected, and hoped successfully to combat, the girl simply showed him the tip of her tongue. "There!" she added defiantly after this vulgar exhibition.

"Do, for Heaven's sake, listen to reason——" he began, irately.

"Don't waste time," she interrupted. "I know what you want me to hear, but I can't wait for your words of wisdom. I must make haste to pack and run away as fast as I can!"

She darted towards Miss Abigail's tent, throwing him a glance of derisive revolt over her shoulder. He was helpless. Anyway he had but done what seemed to him his duty, and he had been given no chance of emphasising the fact that in leaving the camp she would be sparing him and Miss Abigail additional responsibility. . . . Yet he doubted if any argument under the sun would prevail with her now. To remain and risk death would, of course, enhance the feeling of superiority and benevolence that on her own admission she found so pleasant!

He rode back to the works determined to put her out of his mind. He had more to think of, he told himself, than a tiresome, pig-headed girl; but later in the day, when he caught sight of her with Miss Abigail and the Bible-teacher herding a flock of women and children into a new-made enclosure, his conscience murmured reproaches. At least Dorothy

Baker's pluck was undeniable, even though it might be the pluck of ignorance and self-will. . . .

That was a dreadful night. At times the hot, still air rang with the weeping and wailing of mourners, piteous cries that rose and fell; the silences that intervened seemed even worse—while the fight with death went on. Now and then it appeared as if the fatal scourge had been checked in its merciless progress; then again, as though leaping the barriers, it would break out in some quarter hitherto free. Luckily remedies held out, and more were expected in answer to urgent telegrams. By dawn further medical help had arrived, and as the sun rose, fierce and cruel, Flint felt justified in snatching a rest. He was roused from heavy sleep by a message, a message scribbled in obvious haste and agitation by Miss Baker from the Mission camp.

"Please come quickly; it's Miss Abigail."

An ominous summons! Fearing its import, he obeyed it without delay, ordered a horse to be saddled, threw on his clothes, and rode rapidly. Arrived, he found, within a sagging little sleeping tent, Miss Baker seated beside a narrow camp-bed on which, as he perceived at first glance, lay a dying woman. The once round, tanned face of the lady missionary was wet and grey, so strangely altered; the sturdy form was twisted and shrunken. A horrible odour pervaded the atmosphere, mingled with the smell of drugs and straw and canvas. At the foot of the bed a dishevelled ayah crouched terrified, weeping. On the rough, uneven drugget was scattered a confusion of clothes, a couple of tin

basins, a shabby Bible, a notebook. The solitary camp table was covered with bottles and coarse crockery.

Dorothy Baker turned to Philip Flint; she was pale, trembling a little, yet wonderfully self-controlled.

"It was so sudden!" she faltered, biting her white lips. "This morning she was quite well, full of energy and plans. We had come back for some breakfast, and she was taken ill. Laban fetched the doctor. He stayed as long as he could, and she got better. He said he thought she would pull through. I did everything he told me. But now, see! I have sent for him again——"

Flint laid his finger on a cold wrist. Clearly it was a case of sudden collapse, beyond hope; even as he felt the faint, racing pulse it grew feebler, fluttered spasmodically. . . . He heard the girl's voice in his ear, a choking whisper: "Is she going? Is it the end?"

He nodded, and the whisper went on: "Just before you came she spoke. She said she *knew*, and she wanted to be buried under the tree, under the peepul tree. . . ."

He nodded again. She poured something into a glass and held it out to him. "Try," she urged, "perhaps she could take it."

To please her he tried, though he knew it was useless. What a pitiful death scene—the cramped, untidy little tent, the coarse bedclothes, the scanty furniture; the only ornament, if so it could be called, a text printed in large black letters on a piece of card-

board, hung to a nail on the yellow tent-pole: "Thy Rod and Thy Staff They Comfort Me."

Yet Philip felt it was all ennobled by the sound faith, the unswerving purpose of the strong, simple soul whose work on earth was over. For a few moments there was silence; even the stifled, convulsive sobbing of the ayah crouched at the foot of the bed had ceased; the woman hid her face in her wrapper. Then, presently, with a long-drawn sigh, a gallant spirit passed to rest. For Ann Abigail, ardent Christian, brave worker in the cause of alien souls and bodies, no more weary hot weathers, no more disappointment, discomfort, sacrifice. And as Philip gazed down on the blunt features that already were almost beautiful in their repose he found himself picturing Miss Abigail heading a band of helpless, bewildered ghosts, leading them from the camp and the works to regions where suffering, fear and want were unknown. . . .

He remembered Dorothy Baker, and looked round. She was still standing close beside him, silent, her eyes fixed on the dead face; now she swayed, put her hand to her throat: "I have never—I have never seen anyone die——" Then, aware of his concern for her, she added reassuringly, "I'm all right, I'm not going to faint."

"Come into the other tent; where's your hat?"

She did not seem to know. He looked about, found his own, and held it umbrella-wise over her head as he guided her quickly through the burning, midday glare to the living tent that was hardly bigger than the one they had left. She made no resistance,

sat down at his bidding, and drank the brandy he gave her from his flask. Then he stood watching her anxiously as the colour came slowly back to her lips and cheeks. His mind was working swiftly. Somehow he must get the girl away; she had had a severe shock, her vitality was lowered, he dreaded the consequences. . . .

Footsteps and voices outside drew him to the door of the tent, and for the next few hours he and the doctor were busy over such arrangements as were possible for the funeral. The work finished, Flint sent off a messenger mounted on a camel to the railway junction with a couple of telegrams. One was to the headquarters of the Mission in the nearest station, the other was to the wife of the Magistrate, whom he happened to know slightly. He had evolved a plan for the benefit of Miss Baker, and he only trusted she would fall in with it. All the time she had remained in her tent, effaced herself, for which he was grateful to her; perhaps she would be equally sensible when he told her what he had done. . . .

By sundown a rough coffin was ready, composed of packing-cases, a grave had been dug beneath the big peepul tree, and a melancholy little procession started, headed by the bullock shigram that bore Miss Abigail on her final journey. Flint had fetched Miss Baker at the last moment, he had promised her he would do so, and they walked together behind the shigram. Laban, crying bitterly, the native doctor, one or two subordinates followed, and the dead woman's servants; behind them again came a

straggling crowd of people from the works and the camp.

Flint read the burial service. Dorothy Baker stood by his side; now and then she shivered despite the heavy heat of the evening; he saw her glance furtively at the scraps of her handkerchief that hung conspicuous from the branches above their heads. He knew she must be picturing, as he was, the scene of but a few evenings back, when Miss Abigail had knelt praying among the roots of the tree. . . . The air was thick and sultry, perhaps Miss Abigail was right, perhaps rain was not so far off. . . . The setting sun threw a red glow over the land, already the fireflies danced in the branches, the leaves whispered and rustled; two or three bats flew from the foliage, skimming over the open grave and the heap of sulphur-coloured soil at the side. . . . Now the last words had been read, now the coffin, wrapped in a blanket, was lowered into the shallow trench, the dry earth was shovelled over it by the scavenger coolies of the village, and the gathering, all but Philip Flint and the English girl and Laban, departed. At a sign from Flint the coolies collected some of the stones that lay about and piled them upon the grave.

"Oh! she would hate that!" cried the girl impulsively. "The idols, the carvings——"

"There must be some protection," Flint told her reluctantly; "you see, jackals and other animals——"

"I understand." She turned away, gazing sadly over the misty, red plain. "And we have to leave her here by herself! Oh! I can't bear it—India is horrible, horrible!"

For the first time she broke down, leaned, weeping, against the trunk of the tree that, maybe, had seen other human sacrifices offered at its foot. Flint waited for a moment; then he went to her, took her hand gently, protectively.

"Don't grieve too much," he said. "She is all right. She would have asked nothing better than to give her life for her work. We are not leaving *her* here, remember!"

"I wish I could think"—she paused, flung out her hands passionately. "I can't believe anything; I always wondered how she could. And here am I alive and useless, and she has gone. It seems so unfair!"

"I expect she was very tired," said Flint simply, "and is glad to rest. Come back to the camp; Laban will see that it is all finished properly, and I want to talk to you."

They started. It was now almost dark, and he set himself as they went to tell her what he had arranged—that she should take Miss Abigail's personal belongings back to the Mission headquarters.

"The things are all ready," he confessed. "I told the ayah to pack them. There were very few, just a writing-case and a little locked box and some papers and notebooks; one or two photographs, her Bible and Prayer Book. The camp things can all follow later. Of course the clothes she was wearing, and the bed and so on, have had to be burnt, that was necessary; the Mission people will understand."

At first she said nothing. He went on hurriedly: "I can drive you to the junction; there's a train——"

"You want me to go?" she asked below her breath, "to go now, to-night?"

His heart sank. Did she mean to refuse? "It's only right. She would have wished you to go, you know she would."

"But do you wish it?" She bent towards him, trying to see his face in the gathering dusk.

"Only because I know I ought to send you away."

Silence again for a space. "I telegraphed to the Magistrate's wife as well. She is a kind woman, she will take you in if you would prefer it to the Mission House, I am sure."

There was a pathetic little catch in her voice as she answered drearily: "Yes, I suppose I must go. Oh, how everything has altered, just in a few hours!"

"That's India."

"I feel so horribly alone."

"It will be different when you get into the station. I wish I could go with you all the way, but I must stick here till this epidemic is over and things are working properly. Then I go on to another district, where I hear matters are pretty bad. Goodness knows when all the trouble will end."

"I wonder if we shall ever meet again?"

"I hope so. You'll write, won't you, and let me know your plans?"

"Yes, of course. And—shall I go on writing?"

"Would you? I should like it. Sometimes I feel 'horribly alone' too."

"You aren't happy."

"No; I am more alone than you are." They had reached the camp. His trap, which he had ordered beforehand to meet them, was waiting.

"Just pack what you will want for the next day or two," he advised. "I will see that everything else is sent after you at once. You must come and have some dinner with me, and then we'll start for the junction. It's a long drive. The train goes about midnight."

She obeyed him with a touching docility. For the rest of that curious evening she might have been a child, leaning on his judgment, listening to his directions, trusting him utterly. He knew she ate the food that was set before her because he urged her to do so, accepted his brandy flask and the escort of his old bearer for the journey, got into the trap without a word when the moment came for their departure. Jacob leapt at the wheels in an agony of apprehension that he was to be left behind.

"Can't he come too?" she asked; and the panting, whimpering Jacob was hoisted on to her lap. The moon was rising as they set off, a swollen red moon whose light irradiated the veil of dust that hung over the spreading, irregular earthworks, the lines of sheds, the outlying groups of tents. Here and there a few spidery thorn trees showed black and scanty—it was as if a fire had swept the locality and was still smouldering. A hum of voices, the thin wailing of women and children, rose and hung in the hot mist. . . .

The trap rocked over the uneven ground, now sinking into soft powdery soil, now jerking against clods of earth, hard as iron. They left the works and the camps behind them, and headed for the grand trunk road marked by an avenue of great trees in the distance; passed through a village that was silent, deserted; most of the inhabitants had sought refuge on the relief works. On the outskirts they encountered an ash-smeared figure, practically naked, with long, matted hair and upraised arms, who called after them—cursings or blessings, what matter which!

The comparatively smooth surface of the grand trunk road came as a blessed relief, and they spun along swiftly, between the rows of giant trees, avoiding sleepy carts that crawled in the middle of the highway, passing silent, plodding little bands of foot travellers. Neither of them felt inclined for conversation; the hot, still air through which they clove, the rhythmical beat of the pony's hoofs, lulled their senses; even Jacob had long since ceased to fidget and demand attention. . . . As in a dream they arrived at the junction that with its satellites of ugly square buildings appeared to have been dropped without purpose on to a barren plain, and found themselves in the midst of a clamouring throng of humanity; every caste seemed to be represented, from the shaven, high-featured Brahmin priest to the humblest, uncleanest outsider. A proof, so often quoted by the inexperienced observer, of the power of progress! Yet, while the "twice-born" would journey cheek by jowl with the pariah, making use

of the railway for his own convenience, in reality it brought them no nearer to bridging the gulf. A few oblations, ceremonial ablutions, a liberal religious offering, and the high-caste traveller would feel cleansed, soul and body, from the evil effect of such contamination. . . .

The interior of the station was suffocating. Philip shouldered a way for his companion through the crowd to a waiting-room reserved for "Europeans only," where they found a family of Eurasians already installed, bundles innumerable, a pack of fretful children, a litter of domestic belongings spread over the floor.

Philip backed hastily from the entrance. "This won't do," he said. "We must try the refreshment-room."

It was scarcely more inviting, but at least they had the place to themselves, save for a couple of slovenly-looking servants who were flicking crumbs and dead flies from the table laid with dirty appointments. A dingy punkah began to wave jerkily, moving the ill-smelling air. Nauseated, weary, miserable because she was about to part from the only man who had ever appealed to her heart as well as to her mind, Dorothy Baker sat staring at the pretentious electroplated epergne set in the middle of the table, coloured tissue paper ruffled about its base.

How sordid it all was! She dared not look at Philip Flint for fear she should lose her self-control; the lump in her throat was almost strangling. . . .

To Philip her silence, her depression, merely indicated that she was pitifully tired, worn out with the trying events of the day, and no wonder, poor girl! He felt helpless, at his wits' end to know what more he could do for her.

"It won't be long now," he said in hopeful desperation, looking at his watch. "The train ought to be here in a few moments."

"In a few moments," she echoed mechanically.

Then, from outside, came the clangour of metal striking a suspended length of rail, the Indian equivalent of the station bell, announcing the train's arrival.

"Here she is!" Philip rose, half relieved, half reluctant. They plunged into the yelling throng on the platform. Flint's old bearer spread the Miss-sahib's bedding on an empty seat in the ladies' compartment that had only one other occupant, a mummy-like form, fast asleep.

"Now you're all right." Philip looked into the carriage. "You'd better get in and settle yourself for the night."

She held out her hand. "Please don't wait," she said formally, avoiding his gaze. "Good-byes are so horrid, and they say it's unlucky to see the last of a traveller!"

"Unlucky for me to see the last of you. I shall miss you."

"Oh, no, you won't," she said sharply. "Good-bye, and very many thanks for all your kindness."

She got into the train. Through the window he saw her busying herself with her bag. She did not even look up as the train passed out of the station. Chilled and puzzled he turned away. What an odd girl! Her curious behaviour, her grey eyes and freckled eager face filled his thoughts as he drove back to his camp in the hot moonlight.

CHAPTER V

SLOWLY, monotonously for Philip the months dragged on, unmarked by any special events of a personal character. At intervals he heard from Miss Baker. First she reported her safe arrival at the Mission headquarters, having considered it "only right" to go there rather than take advantage of the more comfortable hospitality offered by the Magistrate and his wife. But apparently this meritorious attitude was not fully understood or appreciated by her hard-working hosts, for Miss Baker complained that though the Mission people were always desperately busy themselves they made no real use of the services she was so ready to render; one of them had actually advocated her joining the Station Club that she might obtain some distraction! The next letter came from the Magistrate's bungalow, where Miss Baker was being nursed over an attack, her first attack, of malarial fever; at the Mission House, it seemed, no one had time to look after a white patient! The Magistrate's wife had most opportunely come to the rescue. . . . As soon as a passage could be secured Miss Baker intended to go home. On the whole, she confessed, she felt that her visit to India had not been quite the success she had anticipated. Wherever she went she seemed only to get in the way—and she had meant to be so useful! English people in India wasted their energies over things that did not greatly

matter, and in consequence had no time for more vital questions. Later on, perhaps, she might come back, and with better results; in any case she had gathered ample material for her book, which she would begin on the voyage. . . . She wrote to Philip from board ship, and again from her father's house in Mayfair. The letters still contained criticisms aimed at British administration in India, but through them all there ran a pathetic little undercurrent of self-distrust that reached Philip's sympathy; and her never-failing remembrance of their brief companionship touched him—always her love to Jacob, and how was the chestnut pony, and the old bearer, and did he recollect this, that, and the other? Also when was he coming home? A few mails later (great excitement) she had met Lady Lane-Johnson, his sister, at a big literary gathering, quite by accident; they had begun to talk about India, and then of course had discovered, etc., etc.

These letters, though Philip sometimes felt it an effort to answer them, were welcome during the dreary routine of duty, as inspection followed inspection, journey upon journey, by road or by rail, from one famine-smitten area to another. The battle with death and want continued through the long, hot days and nights, until, as though with belated compassion, nature at last stepped in, and a strong monsoon swept up from the coast, allaying epidemics, washing away disease and dirt, reviving energy and hope; and if the work was still as strenuous in its way, it was at least work that was spurred by relief and thankfulness in place of dread and despair.

With the cessation of the rains Flint felt free to take a breathing-space. His leave granted for September, he sought a popular station, that, not being the headquarters of a Provincial Government, was in a measure exempt from official etiquette and certain irksome observances that prevailed in the more important health resorts. Surima, its dwellings perched like a flock of white birds on the slopes of the high hills, was notorious for its gaiety and its gregarious gatherings. Here assembled merchants from the great ports, lonely ladies whose health and spirits suffered from the heat and the dullness of the plains, subalterns intent on "a good time," holiday-makers of every service and calling, and an abundance of pretty girls. . . .

Philip selected Surima for his leave because he felt it might be possible to lose his identity for the time being in such a motley crowd. He need make no calls; Government House with a visitors' book and commands to social functions was non-existent. His presence would not be noted. He intended to loaf, to spend long hours in the life-giving air on the hill-sides, perhaps do a little shooting—jungle fowl, a bear or two, possibly a leopard. He would have ease and leisure in which to make up his mind whether to sink back to the level of humdrum district administration until his first pension was due and he could leave India altogether, or set himself to regain his position in the front ranks of competitors for high office. He realised that he was overworked, that his mental outlook was hardly to be trusted at present, deranged as it had been by the distressing affair at

Rassih. Given time and rest he might manage, in a measure, to make a fresh start and to put the past behind him. . . .

To his disgust the Club chambers at Surima were full, and he was forced to find temporary quarters in a fashionable hotel that occupied a central position. It was close on the dinner hour when he arrived, and as he changed into evening clothes he found it difficult to realise that for a full month he would be master of his time, able to follow his own inclinations. With a sense of personal freedom he strolled into the dining-room only to be confronted by a scene that, at first glance, made him query—was he, by any chance, in a lunatic asylum instead of a hotel?

The tables were crowded with a chattering throng garbed in a variety of fantastic costumes, a host of masqueraders. He beheld a devil complete with horns and tail; a red Indian; an aerial being all wings and gossamer; figures enveloped in dominoes; others painted, patched, bewigged—all laughing and talking and eating. He felt like a sparrow that had strayed into an aviary of tropical birds. Humbly he slipped into an empty seat beside a stout youth draped in a leopard skin, with a wreath on his brow! "Bacchus," or whatever mythological character this individual imagined he represented, made way for the stranger good-naturedly.

"Got up just in time for the ball!" he shouted, as though it were a matter for the heartiest congratulation.

"Is there a ball?" inquired Philip, dismayed. What a superfluous question!

"Rather! *The* fancy ball of the season. Every soul in the place will be at it. Know many people up here?"

"Nobody—that I am aware of."

"Soon cure that complaint! Keen on dancing?"

"Not particularly; and dancing hasn't been exactly encouraged where I come from!" He thought grimly of desolate camps, of relief works, bare plains and stricken villages, of all the stress and the strain of the last year. What could be farther from festivity!

"Some beastly little station, I suppose," assumed his companion sympathetically. "If it wasn't for places like Surima we should all rot and die. I come from a hole sixty miles off the railway; only seven of us all told including the women; just a small hell upon earth. I put in for 'three months' urgent private affairs,' my only chance," he grinned. "Luckily they asked no awkward questions. Next week my leave's up, worse luck!"

He fell to eating dejectedly, but soon added in a hopeful tone: "Anyway, I'm going to enjoy my last hours. Now, if you want introductions remember I'm your man. No dog-in-the-manger about J. D. Horniblow!" He looked round the room. "Plenty to choose from if you're not over particular."

"Thanks, don't bother about me," said Philip indifferently. "Bed is more in my line than a ball to-night."

"Oh! but you *must* see what we can produce in the way of beauty, even if you don't want to dance. All this lot here are nothing compared with——" He

began to reel off names with impudent comments on each.

Philip paid small attention, till he became aware that the chatterbox was describing with enthusiasm the charms of a particular lady, over whom, he asserted, the whole place was crazy; the name came to his ears with the effect of a pistol shot. . . .

He stammered out: "Who—who did you say—Mrs.—Mrs. Crayfield?"

"Yes, Mrs. Crayfield. She's the rage, absolutely divine. She and her friend Mrs. Matthews carry everything before them; not that Mrs. M. can compare with Mrs. C., though little Mrs. M. is fetching enough in her own way. I *might* manage to introduce you. I'll try, if you like, but they're in the General's set, and that's rather a close preserve. The old boy fancies himself no end with Mrs. C.; and young Nash, his aide-de-camp, poodles for Mrs. Matthews, so it's very convenient all round."

Flint writhed in silence. Was there another Mrs. Crayfield? Soon he would know, and he tried to be deaf to the rattle of this jackanapes.

Joining the tail of the crowd that surged into the ballroom after dinner, he took up a position against the whitewashed wall that was decorated with flimsy festoons of pink and blue muslin, and watched the revellers filling their programmes, chaffing, laughing. What fools they looked! How could grown-up people be so idiotic. . . . Yet, in justice, he reminded himself that the majority of them must have endured the hardships inseparable from exile, trials of climate, and sickness, and separation, even actual

danger to life and person; that they would go back to these conditions, grumbling no doubt, but refreshed and strengthened to endure them again by such frivolities, this pathetic aping of "smart society" that would be regarded with contemptuous amusement by its superior prototype at home. How Dorothy Baker would have censured the scene, simply because it was laid in India, where, of course, none of her compatriots deserved, or should desire, frivolous recreation! Not one of these merrymakers but would face death without hesitation should the necessity arise; and in a community all more or less of one class there was bound to be scandal, with far less reason very often than in their own country, where wickedness could be hidden successfully. . . . He almost forgave the harmless enough gossip he had heard at the dinner table, even endeavoured to tolerate his would-be friend who buzzed round him, so important as "one in the know," still offering introductions.

"Little Miss Green, now—that girl over there dressed as a butterfly? Not much to look at, I grant you. With her figure she ought to have gone as a blue-bottle, but she can dance, and first go-off in a place like this you have to take what you can get. She and her sisters rely on the new-comers, thankful for any kind of partners; sensible girls! Easy enough to drop them when you get into the swim. Or there's Mrs. Bray; only her husband's jealous. Of course they're known as the donkeys. He won't let her dance with anyone more than once. There was a row at the last Cinderella——"

Flint bestirred himself. "Please don't trouble. I

don't want to dance. I'll just look on for a bit." He nodded a polite but determined dismissal, and was turning away when his tormentor exclaimed:

"Ah! Here we are! Now look. Here she comes, the General in tow, of course, and half a dozen other adorers. She's a fine hand at driving a team!"

Flint held his breath, his heart seemed to rise in his throat as the crowd parted slightly and a group came through one of the doorways. To the swing of a waltz he saw Stella—yes, Stella—advancing down the long, shining floor of the ballroom, radiant, light-hearted, attended by a little court of men mostly in uniform. He could not have told how she was dressed, he merely had an impression of floating pink drapery, gleams of silver; she looked to him taller, less girlish, in a way changed; her bearing held a gay confidence. . . . How different from his last sight of her—a wan, despairing figure, huddled weeping in a chair! She had forgotten him; their love had been but an episode in her young life, while for his part how he had suffered! — sacrificed so much. He ought to have expected it, should have realised that, child as she was, her heart must heal quickly from a wound that, though painful enough no doubt at the time, had not gone deep. Youth had asserted its claim; pleasure, social success, admiration, had consoled her successfully. He strove for her sake to feel glad, to stem the storm of rage and self-pity that seized him. Devil take the handsome, elderly satyr who was speaking in her ear. . . . She was smiling at him; it was unbearable. Now she was hidden by the whirling throng. He waited, morose and miserable, planning

to leave the bright scene before she should discover his presence, to clear out of Surima at dawn, and go where he could assert his claim to advancement, pick up the threads of ambition, push and trample and fight his way fiercely to the top. It was not too late, the way was still open. . . .

Yet, unable to tear himself away, he stood, a stiff, black figure against the wall, his eyes scanning the dancers, until presently she passed him in the arms of her distinguished-looking partner, the scarlet of whose coat clashed harshly with the rose-colour of her gown. As they danced they were talking and laughing. In his mind Philip called to her: "Stella! Stella!"; he felt as if the whole room must hear him. . . . The pair halted at the opposite side of the room. The man was bending his iron-grey head towards her; there was force, personality in the well set-up figure and the bold features that but just escaped coarseness. He was taking Stella's fan from her hand with a familiar, proprietary air that to Philip was maddening; he lost hold of his high intentions and crossed the room deliberately, making his way among the dancers regardless of their indignant protests, the collisions he caused; as far as he was concerned they might all have been phantoms—he simply walked through them.

Then he stood before Stella, before the woman he loved, bowed like any casual acquaintance, and heard himself saying:

"Mrs. Crayfield, have you forgotten me? My name is Flint."

Startled, she looked up, and he saw the colour

drain from her lips and cheeks. The General stiffened, clearly resenting the intrusion.

"I've just got up from the plains," continued Philip pleasantly, though he found it hard to steady his voice. "I had no idea you were at Surima. It's a long time since we last met, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said faintly, not looking at him; "a long time——"

He knew that for the moment, at any rate, he was being a kill-joy, a ghost at the feast, calling up the past, spoiling her pleasure. Yet the consciousness was mingled with a sense of revengeful satisfaction that he could not control. Her passing vexation of spirit was as nothing compared with the tortures of his own.

"Come along, Mrs. Crayfield," the General was moving his feet, impatient to be off again, "we shall miss the last part of the waltz." He made as if to place his arm about her waist.

Philip turned aside, not waiting for her to look at or speak to him further. Blindly he made his way from the ballroom, his thoughts, his sensations in confusion, only to find himself in the midst of a babbling concourse of natives outside, bearers of the canoe-shaped conveyances in which ladies, and even a few men, were borne to the dance; neighing ponies were clustered by the railings; it was all jostle and noise. He walked round to the side of the hotel and discovered an empty veranda, a quiet refuge where he could smoke and attempt to think calmly. As he leaned on the railing his racked nerves welcomed the cold night air, the star-lit peace, the scent and the

faint stir of the pine trees. Beneath the ramshackle building sloped the wooded hill-side; far, far below lay the wide plains, dark and boundless as an ocean. Right and left in endless majesty stretched the mountains, and back in ever-rising ranges to the snow peaks, "the home of the gods." His thoughts went loosely adrift; that little crowd of human beings dancing, philandering in the ballroom, intent on their enjoyment, their fleeting loves and hates; whose lives were less than infinitesimal fractions of seconds compared with the ages! Who could grudge them their "little day" while it lasted? Nature had no pity, no sympathy for the struggles, the temptations, the sorrows, the pleasures of the ever-passing multitude of human insects loving and dancing and fighting through their short moments of darkness or sunshine. . . . What was love, what was sin? What difference could it make whether any of them failed or succeeded, did what seemed to them right or wrong! Nothing really mattered. . . . . Should the human race be swept from the face of the earth, the hills and the plains, the seas and the sun, the moon and the stars, would go on to the end of Time. . . .

Footsteps and voices broke in on Flint's wild, if hardly original, reflections. He recognised that a couple intent on privacy were groping their way into the dark retreat. He heard the grating of chairs on the stone floor, caught snatches of talk as he hid himself instinctively in the shadow of a pillar.

"All right?" the man's tone was full of tender concern. "You won't feel cold? Now listen—give me your hand, your dear little hand! I must tell you.

I can't wait any longer. You *know*, don't you, darling?"

There came a tearful, agitated response. "Yes, but there will be such a row. Mother and father will never understand——"

"Oh! they will, when they see we're determined. Don't be frightened. We've only got to stick to it, hold on. You do love me, sweetheart, don't you?"

Philip slunk round the pillar and left the lovers to themselves. How he envied the two young creatures! —their path clear before them save for the frail barrier of parental prudence, which, of course, in the end would break down. It was all so idyllic, so natural. What a contrast to his own dark outlook where love was concerned. . . . In bitter envy he loitered on the pathway outside, beset by a longing to return to the ballroom that he might catch just one more glimpse of Stella, whatever the cost, before turning his back on Surima at dawn.

In a few moments he was standing among a group of spectators in one of the doorways, his eyes anxiously searching the crowd of dancers. But in vain; she was not in the ballroom.

"Hullo! This is luck. Thought you'd gone bye-bye!" His importunate acquaintance of the dinner-table was pushing a way to his side. "Flint *is* your name, isn't it?"

Philip nodded absently.

"Well, Mrs. Matthews would like me to introduce you; she says she knows all about you. Dark horse, *you* are! You never let on when I mentioned her at dinner. It was only when she got hold of me just

now and said: 'Mr. Horniblow, you know everybody, can you point me out a new arrival whose name is Mr. Flint,' that I smelt a rat, and of course I made straight for *you*. There she is. Come on now, quick, or we shall miss her."

He grabbed Philip's coat sleeve and dragged him forward. Before he could resist he was being presented to a lively-looking little lady all sequins and red and gold tissue, and a tambourine.

"That was very clever of you, Mr. Horniblow," she said brightly to the triumphant go-between. "Thank you so much."

She turned in pretty apology to Philip. "Don't think me too bold," she seemed to be pitching her voice high of intention, "perhaps you've forgotten me? But *I* remember *you!*" She shot him a meaning glance, and he could not but take the hint.

He feigned pleasure. "This is a surprise! But when we last met you weren't a gypsy, or—or a Spanish dancer—which must be my excuse for not recognising you at once." He offered her his arm.

With a charming smile she waved away her late partner, a diffident young soldier easily shelved for the moment; and talking gaily of the dance, of the dresses, of anything, she guided Philip to the platform, of which the front seats were filled with chaperones and partnerless girls. Well at the back, screened by this rampart of female forms, stood a sofa, safe from listening ears. They took possession of it.

"Neatly done!" exclaimed Mrs. Matthews, sinking to her seat.

"Very," returned Philip, "but I don't quite understand——"

"You *are* Mr. Flint, Mr. Philip Flint?"

"Certainly. That is my name."

"Well, Mrs. Crayfield has gone home."

"Oh? Wasn't she feeling fit?" he inquired, apparently unmoved.

She glanced at him in rather resentful surprise. "Now don't be tiresome," she said quickly. "I know all about it, and we haven't much time to talk. I can't throw over any more partners. Stella was worried, upset, at seeing you so unexpectedly. I said I'd find you and explain. She's staying with me; we were girls together, you know. I dare say Stella has told you about me, Maud Verrall?"

"Yes, of course." Of course he knew about Maud Verrall, and The Court and The Chestnuts, and Grandmamma and the Aunts; had any detail of Stella's childhood, imparted to him by her, faded from his mind!

"We only got into touch with each other again at the beginning of this hot weather; somehow we'd stopped writing. But when I settled to come up here I wrote and asked if I could break my journey with the Crayfields for a few days. What an awful hole Rassih is! I found Stella half dead. That old brute, Colonel Crayfield, ought to be shot, and his horrible servant too. Between them they had nearly killed the poor girl."

Philip moved uneasily, and drew in his breath. "Do you——" he began, but he was not allowed to finish his question; Mrs. Matthews took it up.

"Do I know everything? Of course Stella told me, and the silly row about the pearls that gave the show away. She had a perfectly poisonous time after you left; I don't know how she got through it, and I'm sure she doesn't know either. When I turned up, old Crayfield was getting rather sick of her always being seedy; and I diddled him into letting her come with me. He took a fancy to me, and I let him—any port in a storm! We've lived in terror that he would come up on leave, but luckily he hasn't been able to get away. Stella was awfully ill for the first few weeks after we arrived——"

"She looks very well now," said Philip coldly, "and happy," he added.

His companion smote him sharply on the knee with her fan.

"My good man, you ought to be thankful, both for your own sake and for hers!"

"I am; and for that reason don't you think I'd better go without seeing her again?"

Mrs. Matthews hesitated; and Philip waited, hoping for some crumb of comfort, for the smallest encouragement to stay.

The answer came slowly. "I think you ought to go. You see—you see Stella has found out the power of her beauty and her charm, and it's a sort of consolation to her. She'll never get into mischief, not seriously, I mean, with anyone else, and as you and she can't come together again without the risk of a lot of bother and trouble, you'd much better let her alone. You can't blame her if she takes what she can get out of life under the circumstances——"

"I don't," he said shortly. "If she can put the past behind her I can but try to do the same."

"Wise man! Oh! look at this creature making for me; I shall have to go, the dance has begun."

A cowboy had climbed the daïs in pursuit of Mrs. Matthews, and further hope of confidential conversation was blocked. Philip rose and held out his hand.

"Good-bye, then—and thank you for your advice. I will take it. I recognise that you are right."

As they parted he saw sympathy in her bright eyes, and was grudgingly, miserably grateful.

CHAPTER VI

"Oh! How slack I feel. Dances are the devil!" Maud Matthews yawned and stretched amid a nest of cushions in a long chair. "I'm sure I must look about sixty. Do I, Stella?"

She appealed to her friend who at that moment joined her in the veranda of the Swiss Chalet-like habitation perched on the hill-side. Clear midday sunshine blazed over the terraced garden thick with dahlias, crimson and purple, orange-red, yellow, a wild, luxuriant growth. Pots of chrysanthemums fringed the veranda steps, an autumn odour pervaded the atmosphere, a smell of ferns and moss and pungent evaporation. The sky was like pale blue glass, and far, far away, beyond valleys and rising ranges, glittered and sparkled the everlasting snows.

Outside, on the narrow pathway, young Richard was asserting himself in a perambulator, attended by the long-suffering ayah who every few minutes retrieved a woolly toy, handing it back to the small tyrant with indulgent remonstrance. "Hai-yai! What is to be done with such a malefactor! Must not throw; it is forbidden."

"Beat him," his mother advised lazily. "Beat him with a big stick."

"Dost harken?" warned the ayah. "One more throw, and see what will befall!"

Instantly the woolly toy was again hurtled down

among the dahlias, and the child shrieked with mischievous glee.

"Aree! Narty!" the ayah picked up her petticoats and plunged into the foliage.

Unperturbed by her son's misdemeanours, Mrs. Matthews turned once more to her guest and began to patter nonsense. Truth to tell she was nervously delaying the moment when Stella's questions must be answered.

"If possible, dear thing, you look even more dreadful than I do, though you went home so early last night. I got back at some disreputable hour and peeped into your room, but you were asleep. Really, to look at you, one would imagine *your* husband was coming up on leave next week instead of mine. What on earth shall I do with Dick! He'll hate all my men friends, and be rude to them, and expect me to break all my engagements. I suppose we shall go to bed early and have long walks before breakfast, and devote ourselves to young Richard with intervals for arguments over domestic affairs——"

"Oh! to hear you," interrupted Stella with exasperation, "one would think you didn't care one snap for Dick or that imp in the perambulator. Why humbug with me of all people?"

"Yes, I know," in hasty apology. "I know I am lucky. Yet you have your compensations. You are ever so much better looking than I am, and your looks are of the sort that will last. Your nose, for example; it's a nose for a lifetime! *You* can amuse yourself with a clear conscience, without feeling a pig, as I do when I flirt till all's blue. How I am to suppress

Bobbie Nash when Dick appears on the scene is a problem, and I can't give the young owl a hint beforehand; that would be a bit too low! Now, you and your old play-boy—even Dick couldn't make a fuss if it was the General instead of Bobbie Nash!"

"Oh, Maud, do stop!" cried Stella, at the end of her endurance. Maud's little excitements and intrigues were so trivial; no misery, no heartache, lay beneath the surface of her frivolity. Stella knew well enough that Maud loved her husband, and that once he was on the spot she would be happy in his company, though in his absence the attentions of a herd of irresponsible young men was as the breath of her nostrils. "How can you go on gabbling like this when you know what I am longing to hear?"

Last night she had fled from the ballroom, distraught by the sudden, unexpected meeting with Philip. It had been beyond her to remain as if nothing had happened. She was at a loss to interpret his demeanour, so distant, so formal; did he intend her to understand that his feelings had changed? She had relied upon Maud to find out; for hours she had lain awake listening for Maud's return till, from sheer exhaustion, she had fallen asleep, and, after all, Maud had not awakened her. Both of them had slept late into the morning, and now Maud would only drivel about her own silly affairs. The suspense was intolerable; she could bear it no longer.

"Aren't you going to tell me *anything?*" she demanded furiously.

"Wait a moment." Mrs. Matthews rose from her long chair and went to kiss her obstreperous off-

spring in the perambulator, gave some directions to the ayah and banished the pair to another quarter of the garden out of sight and hearing. Then she returned to her seat and faced Stella with reluctance.

"It's rather difficult to tell you," she began. "That was why I was putting it off. He has gone."

Stella flushed and paled. "Gone? Gone away from Surima—from—from me?"

Maud nodded. "Now, dear thing, be sensible. I assure you he hopes you may have got over that unfortunate business between you. He wants to get over it too. I don't say he has, any more than you have, altogether, but you both will, given the chance. Isn't it best? You can't deny it, Stella."

"Oh, Maud, what have you done?" Stella's voice rang sharp with pain and reproach. Her disappointment was poignant. She had expected some message, she hardly knew what, but something of solace and reassurance, at the least that Philip wanted to see her alone. She had never dreamed that he would not wish to see her.

"I haven't done anything," declared Maud defensively. "He saw for himself that you weren't exactly pining away without him, and if you do still care about him you ought to be thankful that he has gone off like this without making further trouble for you or for himself. After all, you wouldn't bolt with him when you had the chance, and quite right too! And now you shouldn't want him to be a martyr any more than he wants you to mope for the rest of your life."

Stella gazed at her blankly. Staunch friend

though Maud was, how little she understood. Oh, why had she not stayed on at the ball? She might have got at the truth for herself. Instead, she had behaved like a fool, like a coward; and so Philip had gone!

She burst out: "Tell me what he said, what you said. Tell me exactly. Don't dare to keep anything from me."

"My dear girl, keep calm. You can't expect me to remember every single word we uttered. I'm not trying to make mischief and muddles, like people in stories. I simply told him how I had got you away from Rassih and how ill you were, and he simply said that as you looked very happy and well he thought the best thing he could do was to clear out, and I agreed with him. I pointed out that you had learnt to enjoy yourself, and that he couldn't blame you. He said he didn't. I must say I don't wonder you fell in love with him, especially at Rassih. He is an awfully good sort; but you know if he had stayed here now the whole thing would have begun all over again, and been worse than ever. Buck up, Stella! You had a lucky escape. I dare say I might have persuaded him to stay, but I knew it was best not to. When you have thought it all over you'll say I was right and be grateful, instead of looking as if you would like to poke my eyes out!"

Stella sat miserably silent. There was nothing further to be said. It would hardly be fair to accuse Maud of having done her an ill turn, but at present she certainly could not bring herself to feel grateful. Sore and wretched, she rose.

"I'm going for a walk before tiffin," she said abruptly.

"Keep out of the sun, then," advised Maud, "or you'll have a headache. Remember it's the General's garden party this afternoon, and the club dinner and theatricals to-night. Just put out the 'Not at home box,' will you? I'm not fit to be seen this morning, and can't be bothered with callers."

A little later Stella strolled along the pathway. She hung the protective card-box on the trunk of the pine tree that guarded the small domain; then she wandered up the steep incline towards an upper road little frequented by the English community. It led to the back of the hill, where as yet no bungalows had been erected, dwindling eventually to a mere bridle path used by the hill people from far distant villages. Once away from all sound of the station, she seated herself on a moss-covered boulder and gazed gloomily over the blue valleys and the opposite mountains that in the rarefied atmosphere looked so unnaturally near. Jungle fowl were calling, crickets sang lustily among the ferns that fringed the tree branches; a family of black monkeys crossed the path and went crashing and chattering down the wooded precipice below; round the shoulder of the hill trudged a stalwart hill-woman, a load of charcoal on her back in a conical-shaped basket. She had a flat Mongolian countenance, red colour in her brown cheeks, and her eyes were like green agates; a heavy turquoise necklace hung round her neck. She grinned a friendly greeting as she passed the forlorn figure seated by the wayside, and Stella envied her. How

contented and independent she looked, though probably she had two or three husbands and led a hard life of toil. At any rate, she was neither desolate nor oppressed. The sound of her stately tramping died away, and at last, influenced unconsciously by the solitude, the grand beauty of the landscape, the purity of the air, Stella began to think more coherently, to think of all she would have told Philip had he been beside her asking for her confidence, anxious to know all that had befallen her since their parting at Rassih. Then, though she had thought he was going out of her life, the distress and the terror had been leavened by the conviction that he loved her. This time he had gone of his own free will, ready to forget her, wishing to forget her. It seemed years since he had called to her that night in the big drawing-room. She seemed to hear his voice now, charged with love and despair. And the memory of the time intervening until Maud's arrival was like a long nightmare, followed at Surima by a blank that, ill as she was, came as a dreamless, refreshing sleep from which she had awakened to a world of diversion.

With returning health and the stimulation of Maud's company she had begun to find solace in her freedom, in the power of her beauty, which slowly she had learn to value. At first the attention she attracted came to her as a genuine surprise, and all the dances, the parties, the light-hearted gatherings proved a welcome refuge from depressing thought. Finally she had plunged into the gay whirl with a will, encouraged by Maud, living solely in the

agreeable, intoxicating present, banishing as far as possible the past from her mind, refusing to look forward.

And in one second all the false ramparts she had erected around her had crumbled to dust. One moment she had been laughing, free from care, the next she had looked up in the midst of some careless banter to see Philip—but what a different Philip, cold and callous and hard! Stella did not doubt Maud's version of the conversation that had passed between the two. It seemed clear enough that Philip shrank from renewal of the past, and was it any wonder? She tried to be just to him, yet a feeling of bitter resentment fought with her sense of fair play. Why, when she had discovered that, given the opportunity, life could be enjoyed, should he have come to disturb and distress her? Where, all this time, had he been, what had he been doing? No word concerning him had reached her. Of course, she understood that he had not known she was at Surima; yet why, if he did not wish to meet her again, had he come up to her in the ball-room? Surely it would have been simple enough to leave Surima without allowing her to know he had been there at all. Was it partly for her sake that he had, to quote Maud, "cleared out," or was it entirely because he feared she might expect him to lay his heart at her feet once more? Whatever the reason the result was the same. He had gone without a word or a message that would have left her in possession of the truth.

Passionately she wished she had the power to

wipe the whole incident from her mind. Maud was right; she had her compensations; but of what value would they be to her once she was back at Rassih? In another month or less she must return to Robert, to the horrible old house, to Sher Singh, and the loneliness, the dull round of petty happenings repeated day after day. . . . A fierce defiance seized her; at least she had this month before her; she could but make the best of it. Her heart hardened. She looked up at the clear blue sky, watched an eagle soaring over the valley, became conscious of the vast, sunny peace around her, drew in long breaths of the wonderful air. . . . After all, she was young, she was well; and when she returned to Rassih she would endeavour to recover her influence with Robert. Once reassured of her loyalty he might allow her to invite friends to stay with her, friends she had made at Surima, might permit her to pay visits in return. Next year she would manœuvre to take a house of her own at Surima for the hot-weather months. With such a prospect the coming winter could be endured. She realised that Robert, on his part, had a grievance against her; undoubtedly she had been a disappointment to him. She owed him some consideration; in his way he had not been ungenerous; all this time at Surima he had kept her well supplied with money, and if he had been glad to get rid of her was it not only natural?

Well, she would continue to enjoy herself now, and then she would go back and wheedle and coax and work upon Robert's weaknesses until she could induce him to grant her liberty when occasion should

arise. Let Philip go hang. If he wished to forget her let him do so; she could play the same game, and play it she would! Resolutely she turned her mind to coming dissipations; the General's garden party this afternoon—she was fully aware that the station regarded her as the special "favourite" of Sir George Rolt. Subalterns made up to her with the idea that she held the ear of the Chief; not only subalterns either, but more senior aspirants to favour and promotion. The sense of prestige and power fed the worst side of her nature, and, in addition, she liked Sir George Rolt, whose free admiration raised her to a pinnacle of importance, rendered her an object of envy among all the other women of a certain type in the place who possessed any claim to attractions. To-night there would be the Club dinner, with theatricals to follow; at both gatherings she knew she would be the best looking, best dressed woman of the throng, and her sore spirit took comfort in the conviction.

Stella wandered back to the little bungalow on the side of the hill feeling as though she had drunk deep of some draught that stilled trouble and pain for the time, however pernicious its after-effects.

CHAPTER VII

THE Swan Song of the Surima season took the form of a picnic—a truly ambitious entertainment given by a moneyed merchant from Calcutta, whose ideas of hospitality had apparently no boundaries. A banquet was prepared in the vicinity of a famous waterfall some two miles below the station; champagne vied with the waterfall itself in its volume and flow; there was a band; Badminton nets had been erected on a convenient plateau, and covetable prizes had been provided for the winners of an improvised tournament of two a side; in addition every lady present was to receive a gift—chocolates, scent, pretty, expensive trifles. High spirits prevailed, and amid the gay, well-dressed assemblage of women Mrs. Crayfield was pre-eminent.

Stella had won the first prize in the tournament, a jewelled bangle; animated, flushed, she stood the centre of attention receiving congratulations, protesting that her success was due only to her handicap, and to the exertions of her partner in the game. "You all know I can't play a bit!" she said laughing, radiant; the bangle was lovely, everyone was so nice, nobody seemed to grudge her the little triumph; it was all delightful.

"Never mind—you have won, no matter how!" chaffed the General. "Now aren't you tired?" he added, lowering his voice. "Come for a stroll, to get an appetite for tea!"

Adroitly he detached her from the crowd that had already begun to disperse in groups and pairs. As Stella and Sir George moved off together Maud and her husband went by; Dick Matthews had arrived at Surima the previous evening, and Bobbie Nash, as some wag had remarked, was nursing his nose in the background for the time being; the only individual, perhaps, who was not altogether enjoying the picnic.

"Don't attempt to follow us!" called Maud as she passed Stella and the General, and she looked back at them over her shoulder, pulled down her mouth, cast up her eyes, then tucked her arm into Dick's and stepped out beside him with an air of exaggerated virtue.

"Little cat!" exclaimed the General, highly entertained with her antics, "as if we should want to follow them!" He glanced about, scanning various directions in which they might hope to find privacy; and presently they were climbing the slope of the mountain above the waterfall to seat themselves on the trunk of a fallen tree screened by a tangle of ferns, saplings, feathery bamboos, beneath the shade of the oaks that rose densely behind them.

Sir George took out his cigarette case. "Well," he said with a resigned sigh, "it's sad to think we shall all be scattered during the next ten days. I wonder when and where you and I will meet again!"

"Goodness knows!" Privately Stella did not particularly care. "Don't let us look forward."

Yet his words gave her a sense of depression after all the gaiety and the glamour of the picnic luncheon

and the surface excitement of the tournament. She was tired, conscious of reaction; her spirits fell. She would have preferred to sit silent, listening to the music of the waterfall, the cheerful chirrup of the crickets, to be soothed by the scenery and the soft evening sunshine, the peace and the remoteness of the surroundings.

"Not look forward to our meeting again?" Reproachful astonishment was in the General's tone as he leaned forward to look into her eyes. "Do you mean to forget me, little girl?"

She was aware of a certain magic in his bold, strong face, in his maturity, and experience of women and of the world. Stella felt helpless, ensnared, yet the ensnarement was enticing, held a baleful fascination. So often during these months at Surima she had felt it, felt at the same time that it meant nothing serious; it was just a game, but a game that Sir George knew so much better than she did how to play without fear of disastrous result. More than once had he led her, as it were, to the edge of the volcano; just a peep over and a timely withdrawal into safety.

"Why don't you answer?" he laid his hand on hers; she moved her hand quickly, yet, as before, not altogether unwilling to dally with the moment that held a little thrill of excitement.

"Of course," she said demurely, "I don't want to forget you. Why should I?"

"Well then, give me something to remember—that we can both remember to the end of our days!"

His arm went round her; his face, his hard, handsome face, was close to hers! he meant to kiss her,

meant business this time—because it was the last opportunity? And of a sudden Stella thought of Philip, of how Philip had held her in his arms, had pressed his lips to hers. . . .

"Don't!" she cried desperately, "don't! You can't understand—it's impossible——"

"Why?" he inquired, intrigued. "Is there someone else?"

She let herself go, turned to him in her distress, with an instinct that he would comprehend if he had but an inkling of her plight. "Yes," she said tremulously, "there is, there was, someone else, and it's all so hopeless, and miserable!"

He held out his hand, this time with friendly, almost fatherly intention. "There! Poor child, how was I to know? Forgive me; I dare say I've been a beast, but I meant no real harm. Tell me all about it, eh?"

Sir George felt as much curiosity as interest to hear the little story. Surely she was too young, too inexperienced, to have had any serious love affair; he was prepared to be secretly amused, as well as to show adequate sympathy. Probably it was just some boy and girl romance, and her parents had married her suitably to put an end to it.

"I can't talk about it," said Stella.

"Did it happen before, or after you were married?" he persisted.

She did not answer.

"Then it was after!"

She nodded reluctantly.

"And shall you see him again?" Clearly it was

no one at Surima, since he himself had been the favoured one of all her adorers.

"No, never!" said Stella vehemently.

"Well then, listen to my words of wisdom. Don't imagine at your age that you won't fall in love again, but when you do remember to keep your head if you can't keep your heart. The world is never well lost for any man's sake, whatever the poets may say. If I'm not mistaken you have plenty of grit; so don't allow circumstances to get the better of you. Take what you can get out of life without losing your place in the ranks of the righteous, or you'll be trampled into the dust. Love as much as you like, but love wisely. Bide your time, Stella, my child; you'll forget this lover, whoever he is, and there'll be plenty more. Break hearts all over the place, they'll mend soon enough, and you'll have had your amusement without paying for it. But don't make false steps and imagine you can't suffer for them at the hands of the world. It's not good enough, believe me!"

From one point of view Stella felt he was right; from another, and a higher point, that his advocations were false. Had he told her to remember her marriage vows, to be faithful in thought as well as in deed to her husband, to shrink with shame from all thought of extracting consolation by devious methods. . . . She almost laughed as she imagined Sir George preaching such practice. Yet in substance his counsel was not far removed from the course she had mapped out for herself that morning on the hill side after her meeting with Philip in the ball-room; and Maud had

often said much the same thing, though not quite so plainly perhaps. Truly she was between the devil and the deep sea; but which was which? To do her duty by Robert honestly, squarely, meant a sort of death in life—the deep sea? To play a part while seeking underhand compensations—the devil?

"Look here," went on Sir George kindly. "Come and stay with me for the race meeting at my headquarters this November. You shall have the time of your life. A big party, all the prettiest women in the Province, and you'll be the prettiest. You shall do hostess if you like. People might talk, no doubt they do now, but that doesn't matter as long as they've nothing to lay hold of. Is it a bargain?"

It was an alluring invitation. But could she accept it with any hope of fulfilment? Perhaps—if she carried out her programme of false conciliation where Robert was concerned.

"I'm not sure if I could get away," she said doubtfully.

"The husband?" queried Sir George smiling. "Aren't you clever enough to get round him?"

Stella felt reckless. "Anyway, I'll try," she declared; and she determined, if humanly possible, to succeed.

"Very well, leave it at that, and let us hope for the best. Count on me to send you the right kind of letter, and we'll pull it off somehow. Cheer up, my dear, never say die!" He patted her hand, and lit his cigarette, persuaded her to take one too, and Stella felt comforted, almost convinced that he and Maud were right—that in time she might forget

Philip; she had all her life before her in which to do so!

Someone was shouting below them; it was the summons to tea. Figures emerged from all quarters, the valley resounded with voices, privacy was at an end. Stella rose readily. "We must go," she said, glad of the interruption; and they scrambled and slipped their way back to the meeting place. At sunset a procession started toward the station—a phalanx of dandies and ponies and more Spartan pedestrians who felt equal to the climb. It was almost dark when Stella and her friends reached their perch on the hill side, tired yet cheerful, ready for a rest if hardly for dinner after the superabundance of fare they had lately enjoyed. Maud rushed to the nursery, Dick hung about, smoking, in the veranda; Stella was making for her bedroom when one of the servants accosted her with a salver in his hand on which lay a yellow envelope.

"Telegram, Memsahib," he said stolidly; she opened it with a qualm of foreboding. It was signed "Antonio," and she read:

"Come down Colonel Crayfield ill."

CHAPTER VIII

"Diagnosis difficult," said Dr. Antonio pompously professional, yet clearly puzzled and disturbed.

Stella stood with him in the big drawing-room that looked dusty and neglected in the dim lamplight, trying to gather what had happened, what was likely to happen. From across the hall came a monotonous sound, a loud, delirious voice repeating some sentence over and over again. On her arrival, soon after midnight, she had scarcely been able to realise that it was indeed Robert who lay on his bed, so strangely altered, talking incoherently, paying no heed to her presence. Mrs. Antonio was there as well as the doctor; apparently the good couple had not left the house for the past twenty-four hours.

"Is it typhoid, do you think?" Stella asked helplessly.

"No, not typhoid, some kind of poison."

"Something he had eaten?"

"How can I say? One day quite well, playing tennis, then feeling ill, sending for me; and all at once very high fever, delirious. As yet not yielding to treatment. Typhoid, smallpox, cholera, malaria," he ticked off the diseases on his fingers, "none of them. I have grave suspicion, Mrs. Crayfield!"

"You mean you think someone has tried to *poison* my husband?"

"Yes, that is what I think."

"But who could it be? The servants have all been with him for years——"

"That is so. But where is that bearer, that Sher Singh?"

Mystified, Stella stared at the old man. "Isn't Sher Singh here?" In all the distraction of her arrival she had not noted Sher Singh's absence, had not thought of him.

"Not here! He has——" Dr. Antonio paused as though searching for a word, "he has *bunked*."

"But surely——"

He shrugged his shoulders, spread out his hands. "*Afim*-wallah, you know!" he said significantly.

"*Afim*-wallah?"

"Yes, opium-eater."

"I don't understand. Dr. Antonio, do speak plainly. Is it your opinion that Sher Singh has been trying to poison my husband? But Sher Singh was so devoted to him!"

"That is just it. Jealousy, and you coming as bride, and the woman, his relation, sent away. Now, brain upset with opium, and you coming back again soon."

"Sher Singh's relation? What relation?" She thought impatiently that the old doctor's imagination had run away with him; then, from the back of her mind, called up by the mention of opium in conjunction with Sher Singh, came the recollection of all Mrs. Antonio had said that hot afternoon long ago in her stuffy, hookah-smelling drawing-room. She visualised the untidy form clad in a grotesque dressing-gown; the bath towel tied over the grey hair,

the mysterious nods, and: "Knowing too many secrets!" What was behind it all? The idea that Sher Singh had tried to poison Robert seemed to her too melodramatic and impossible to be accepted, whatever his provocation or mental condition; yet, according to Dr. Antonio, Sher Singh had disappeared, "bunked!" Why?

"What relation?" she repeated.

Dr. Antonio puffed, and fidgeted his feet. "Oh, no use going over old stories. All done with," he said evasively. "Only, putting two and two together, it is my suspicion that Sher Singh has done harm. But these things are not easy to bring home; at present we have just to think of curing."

He took out a large gold watch, for the clock in the room had stopped. "Will you rest now, Mrs. Crayfield? Not much change likely just yet. My wife, she must go home and get sleep, but I will remain."

"I am not tired," declared Stella, though she ached all over after the long journey. "It is you who ought to rest," and indeed the old man's fatigue was patent. "Let me sit with my husband while you lie down; there is a bed in the dressing-room, and I would call you at once if necessary."

Just then Mrs. Antonio joined them. She also looked well nigh worn out.

"He is dozing now!" she said hopefully; and Stella became aware that the sound in the bedroom had ceased.

A little later she was seated by Robert's bedside, and from the dressing-room came long-drawn, regular

snores which told her that Dr. Antonio was already enjoying his well-deserved rest.

Robert lay quiet, save for his quick, uneven breathing, and now and then a moaning sigh. The punkah had been stopped by Dr. Antonio's orders because, as he had explained to her, it had seemed to worry the patient; it was hardly needed now that the nights were growing cooler except to keep off mosquitoes, and Stella could do that with the palm-leaf fan Mrs. Antonio had handed over to her before her departure.

For an hour she sat fanning the mottled, swollen face on the pillow; the lights were turned low, and the long door-windows stood open. It was a bright starlit night; except for the cry of some restless bird, and the intermittent squabbling of animals at the base of the fort walls, there was little sound. . . . Stella tried not to think, she did not want to think; and to keep her mind quiescent she repeated to herself verses, songs, anything she could recall mechanically, but always with irritating persistency the words of the hymn that seemed to have been the starting point of her real life kept recurring, ousting all else:

I dare not choose my lot
I would not if I might. . . .

Strive as she would she could not get away from the refrain, the very movements of the fan beat time to the words and the tune.

Not mine, not mine the choice. . . .

But she had chosen, she had dared; and what had been the result?

In things or great or small. . . .

Supposing she had made a different choice; for example—on that other occasion, when Philip would so gladly have taken her away to live, if need be as he had said, "just for each other." At that time she had honestly put her own longing aside that his future, his work, his ambitions might not suffer. Supposing she had yielded, failed to "walk aright" according to her own conception, how soon would Philip have discovered his mistake? He owed her much! And she had done her little bit for India—not that India counted any longer with her now; India was to blame for everything, she told herself petulantly, illogically. She did not care what happened to India! . . . Suddenly Robert began to talk, and her whole attention became concentrated upon him. Gradually his voice grew clearer, though it was a curious, unnatural voice as if some stranger were speaking through his lips. Now and then he laughed, a hard self-satisfied little laugh.

"There they all go!" he waved his hand in a mocking welcome. "What a pretty procession! Not a bad record! No trouble, with a little precaution. Ah, Susie, you young devil—ran off with that fellow to spite me, did you? What was his name, now? Couldn't have done anything to suit me better. . . . Not a patch on the little Eurasian girl; look at her! Cost a pretty penny to get her

married to that black railway boy. A fortune for him, anyway. Good child, run along; you're all right. . . . How many more? Where are you all going—to Hell?" He sang hoarsely:

> No rose nor key, nor ring-necked dove,
> She gave but her sweet self to me!

"Yes, eyes like forget-me-nots. That was a lesson, a near shave. Nearly gave me away too, as well as herself. Well out of *that!* Something safer, easier to shunt. Sher Singh knows which side his bread's buttered . . . faithful fellow Sher Singh. . . ." The voice dropped again to an indistinct mutter.

Stella sat aghast. Was it all true, or just the delusions of a disordered brain? She felt in her bones that it was all true. Yet what did it matter? Robert's past life was nothing to her. Only, when he got well, could she forget these revelations, would it not be harder still to face life with him, however she might contrive to go her own way by means of subterfuge—and "precaution"! All shred of consideration and pity for Robert fell away from her as she sat patiently waving the fan. She, also, seemed to vision the "pretty procession" of his victims; they mocked her with their eyes as one of themselves. A nausea seized her of his cruelty, his pitiless sensuality; she felt she could almost applaud Sher Singh if indeed the man had actually tried to poison his master.

Then, without warning, Robert sat upright. Words came tumbling in confusion from his lips; something about the balcony, about someone who had

thrown himself from the balcony. . . . He was getting out of bed! She tried to push him back, called loudly for Dr. Antonio, but the long snores from the dressing-room went on. . . . Now clinging to Robert's arm she was being dragged by the great bulky figure towards the open door that gave on to the balcony, and all the time she called and screamed, not daring to let go. They were out on the balcony; the stars had disappeared, and a faint yellow light was stealing over the sky like the reflection of some vast conflagration unseen in the distance. From below rose a sudden clamour, beasts fighting among themselves over carrion. Robert moved on, unconscious of her frantic efforts to stop him; she was powerless as she felt herself being drawn to the balustrade, still calling, clinging. His hands were on the stonework, he was climbing up, raising her with him. Then all at once he paused, turned his head, looked down on her; his face was terrible. Next moment he had taken her by the shoulders and flung her violently from him, and as she reeled giddily she saw something leap into the dawnlight, something that was like a gigantic bird with wings outstretched. She fell forward, striking her head heavily against the balustrade.

Stella lay semi-conscious, weakly pondering. What a queer smell; she knew the smell, yet could put no name to it; the room seemed unfamiliar, and she found she could see only a portion of it as if the rest were in darkness. What had happened? Where was she? Not that it signified—she felt too ill to care.

When she tried to raise her hand it was heavy as lead—how funny! When she tried to speak she could not remember what she wanted to say. Her hat was too tight, it hurt her head, and she could not take it off. Why was she lying in bed with her hat on? That was funny too! She heard a little feeble laugh—who had laughed? She was very thirsty. . . . Ah, that was nice and cold.

"Thank you," she managed to say politely, as some iced liquid trickled down her throat. Then as her senses slowly awoke she found herself looking into Mrs. Antonio's homely brown face. Kind Mrs. Antonio, who was giving her a delicious drink. Mrs. Antonio would take off the hat that was hurting her forehead. Now she knew the name of the smell that pervaded the room; it was hookah! The successful recollection brought a sense of triumph. She smiled sweetly at Mrs. Antonio. . . .

It was some days before Stella's memory grew clear, before she could recall what had happened up to the moment when she had fallen against the stone balustrade. Now she knew that she was in the Antonios' house, that she had been there for nearly three weeks hovering at death's door; she knew that Robert had been buried in the little European cemetery, and that a new Commissioner had arrived who, according to Mrs. Antonio, was "a very kind man and attending to all business" until Mrs. Crayfield should have recovered sufficiently to do her share; everybody in the station had been "helping and good, there was no hurry about anything, no need to bother." Stella knew also that there was

injury to one side of her head, but to what extent she had not yet thought to ask. Her mind had been too exercised with the realisation of Robert's tragic end, with mingled compassion for him and, she could not pretend to deny it, relief for herself; any effort to look forward was as yet almost beyond her strength.

One morning later, when the bandages had been finally removed and she found she could see with both eyes, she asked Mrs. Antonio to bring her a hand mirror; she said lightly: "I want to see what I look like. I expect I'm an awful fright, but I'm well enough now to bear any shock!"

"Better go through your letters," suggested Mrs. Antonio, laying a little heap of accumulated correspondence on the table beside the bed. "I have to run away just now and see to the fowls and the goats."

She left the room hastily, and Stella fingered the envelopes with reluctance, dreading the condolences and the sympathy she might find within them. First she skimmed the English letters apprehensively; it was possible that the news had been telegraphed home to the papers. No; evidently when last they wrote Grandmamma and the aunts had known nothing. There was a letter, of course, from Maud; one from Sir George Rolt, others from friends she had made at Surima; Mrs. Cuthell had written. All contained stereotyped phrases; difficult letters to write! She hardly read them, because there was one she had put aside as yet unopened—one from Philip Flint! She knew the clear, small handwriting from seeing the manuscript of the George Thomas romance. How

curious that she should receive her first letter from him in such circumstances. What had he written? Just "deep sympathy," no doubt, like all the others! Her hand went out to the letter; she felt faint as at last she forced herself to tear it open. For a few moments the words danced before her eyes. There were very few words; no formal beginning—only this:

"I have seen what has happened, and I write to tell you that I am the same, always the same. If you want me I will come anywhere and at any time. But if you do not write I shall understand.—PHILIP."

She sank back on her pillows. Philip was the same, always the same! She must have known it all along in her heart; how could she ever have doubted him! "Philip," she breathed, "Philip!"

The stuffy, hookah-smelling room was glorified, full of a celestial light. How quickly she would get well; she was well already—all the dark days were over. Happiness lay ahead, such happiness! She would send him just one little line to tell him she had his letter, that she would write; she composed it in her mind. Or should she telegraph, do both? . . . When and where they would meet did not trouble her; time was nothing; whatever interval was necessary would pass like a dream.

Mrs. Antonio, returning from her ministrations to the goats and the fowls, found the patient sitting up in bed, a pencil in her hand, writing on half-sheets of paper.

"Now, now," scolded Mrs. Antonio, shaking her forefinger, "doing too much!"

"I am quite well," said Stella. "I feel I could get up and do anything."

"To-morrow, perhaps, out of bed on the sofa. And Pussy will read to you. Such a nice book she has got, called 'Wide, Wide World.' Shall she come just now?"

"Not to-day, dear Mrs. Antonio. I have had some good news in my letters, and I can't think of anything else. I should like to do my hair when I have finished writing, and then have some of your nice tea. And will you send my letter and a telegram for me to the post office presently?"

"Doing hair! Writing letters! Sending telegrams!" exclaimed Mrs. Antonio. "You are wanting to run before walking!"

"Well, do let me run; I promise not to fall down. There, my letter is ready, and the telegram. Now do give me a looking-glass, and a brush and comb, there's a good soul. I feel I want to smarten myself up!"

"I think the doctor will be coming in just now. Better to wait and ask what he says. Listen!" she cocked her ears. "That is him coming back from the bazaar dispensary. I hear the trap. Wait a moment, Mrs. Crayfield dear——"

She was gone; and Stella, elated, defiant, rose from her bed and tottered across the room. She was determined to see herself in the glass before Mrs. Antonio came back. If she was a scarecrow she would know how long to postpone her meeting with

Philip; she must be looking all right when she met Philip again. . . . Clinging to the furniture, she made her way to the dressing-table. Had she any legs, or hadn't she? If she felt she was walking on air, was it any wonder after Philip's letter! Now she had reached her goal. She bent forward; and in the mirror she beheld a sight that froze her blood. The whole of one side of her face was disfigured, hideous, grotesque; a great, puckered red scar ran from her forehead to her chin, shortening the contour, lifting the edge of her mouth. . . . She was revolting! That was why Mrs. Antonio had evaded her request for a hand glass. . . . Clutching the edge of the table, she stood gazing at the wreck of her beauty. Everything was gone; she could never let Philip see her; and she was so young, so young!

A few minutes later she had groped her way blindly back to the bed. She tore up the letter and the telegram she had written, tore up Philip's letter also. "*If you do not write I shall understand.*" She could never write; Robert's legacy of punishment was complete.

CHAPTER IX

Lady Lane-Johnson looked about her handsome drawing-room with critical gaze. She moved a bowl of roses to a more effective position, loosened a sheaf of Madonna lilies in a crystal vase. The atmosphere was fragrant with the perfume of costly flowers; the whole room betokened prosperity combined with good taste, from the excellent examples of modern Art on the brocade-hung walls to the Aubusson carpet and the silk curtains that subdued the sound of traffic through the open windows. And Philip Flint's sister harmonised with her surroundings, an elegant, well-bred looking woman in a Paris gown, diamonds in her hair, round her neck, at her breast.

She consulted her list of expected guests; the pairing for this dinner party had entailed an unusual amount of consideration. In such undertakings John was of no use whatever; he would rush in at the last moment, and unless she took care would probably seize absentmindedly on the first lady he saw and hurry her down to dinner. Even now he had not returned; if she heard him on the stairs before the arrivals began she must catch him and remind him that he was to take in old Lady Bawe (though he always declared her name ought to be spelt Bore). She herself must put up with Lord Redgate, disagreeable creature, but the laws of etiquette forbade any other arrangement; anyway she would have Carmine

Lake, the fashionable portrait painter, on her other side, and he was good company. Her own parents were rather on her mind; her father never considered the political feelings of his neighbours, and invariably suspected her literary and artistic friends of being Radicals. Concerning Lord Redgate's opinions there could be no question of anything so mild as "suspicion," and she had therefore placed the two gentlemen as far apart at the dinner table as possible. She knew her mother felt "out of it" among actors and painters, and authors, and John's distinguished professional colleagues with their wives who were always busy over public meetings and charity entertainments patronised by Royalty.

As a rule she did not invite her old-fashioned parents to her dinner parties; they preferred to come quietly, when she had an evening to spare, but to-night their presence was unavoidable, because Philip had just arrived from India (she had not even seen him yet), and she particularly wanted him and "the old people" to meet Lord Redgate and his daughter Dorothy, who had known Philip in India two years ago; and if she, Grace, were not greatly mistaken the young lady would like to meet him again as often as possible! Lord Redgate would not have said "Thank you" had she bidden him to a quiet family gathering; that would have to come later if matters shaped as she hoped they might. It would be such an excellent marriage for Philip; Lord Redgate had so much influence, his son-in-law would be pushed on regardless of obstacles, however glaring the "job"; his one weakness was his self-willed,

impulsive daughter, who publicly boasted that she could turn her father round her little finger!

Grace knew from Dorothy that she and Philip had kept up a desultory correspondence since their parting in India. She wondered if she would have time to pump Philip in the matter of his feelings towards the girl if he and the old people arrived early, as she had told them to do. She hoped Philip would not look too "Indian." His clothes were sure to be all wrong, seeing that he had arrived only three days ago, during her absence in the country for a week-end visit. The dinner party had been hastily convened, with apologies and explanations for the short notice, directly his telegram came from Marseilles.

Was that John on the stairs? She flew to the door and saw her husband ascending leisurely.

"Make haste, darling," she called, "and remember you are to take in Lady Bawe."

"Why, is there a dinner party?" He blinked at her dreamily; his scanty hair was ruffled, he looked tried, over-strained. That afternoon he had been engaged on a stupendous operation, and the reaction of success was still upon him.

"Yes, yes, I told you! Go along quickly and dress."

"You look wonderful," he said, smiling at her.

She knew he was proud of her, that he grudged her nothing in the world, that the money he made gave him pleasure principally for her sake, yet sometimes he provoked her almost past bearing, his forgetfulness, his blindness to the value of her social

triumphs that were undoubtedly an indirect asset to him in his calling. His calling came first with him, she came second; and there were no children, nothing to fill her life beyond the eternal round of engagements and social successes, which during the last ten years had become a sort of second nature to her. Now she looked forward to match-making on her brother's behalf.

The front door bell rang. "There!" She waved her husband up the stairs. "Don't be longer than you can help, and whatever you do, remember Lady Bawe."

"Lady Bawe," he repeated, and quickened his steps obediently.

Presently Sir Philip and Lady Flint, and Mr. Flint, were announced.

"Well, mother—well, father." Grace kissed her parents, then turned to embrace her brother. "Philip," she cried, "how you have altered! Is it really you?"

She could hardly believe that this sun-baked, middle-aged man, growing rather bald, with the set face and grave eyes, was Philip. Her remembrance of him last time he was on furlough was so different. Then he had looked almost boyish, full of spirits, enjoying every moment of his leave, yet enthusiastic over his prospects when he should return to his work. Now he looked as if nothing would ever arouse his enthusiasm or high spirits again. He even showed little pleasure at seeing her, and they had been such pals in the old days! Grace supposed it was the want of rest and change that ailed him. He ought

to have come home two years ago, after all his hard work over the famine, instead of being tempted to stay on in a responsible position that, whatever it might lead to, could hardly be worth the sacrifice of health. She thought he looked far from well as she drew him aside and whispered:

"Who do you think is coming to-night on purpose to meet you again?"

"Tell me," he said indifferently.

"Dorothy Baker."

It was a relief to see his face light up with a certain amount of interest. "Dorothy Baker! Just fancy! And when I last saw her——"

His memory turned to an Indian junction and a native-crowded platform, a dimly lit railway carriage, and Dorothy Baker with all her wild ideas, her conceit and her flashes of humility, her freckled face and slim, long figure. "Then she knows I am at home? I'm afraid I didn't write and tell her I was coming."

"Yes, she knows, and presently she and her father will be here. This party is in your honour, dear old boy."

"Very kind of you." There was no more than politeness in his tone, but his sister observed that he looked towards the door as though watching for the arrival of Dorothy Baker.

Mr. Carmine Lake was announced, and Lady Lane-Johnson welcomed him with effusion. Sir Philip Flint glared disapproval of the celebrated artist's abundant locks and soft, tucked shirt, glared more fiercely still on the couple that followed, whose

name was well known in Liberal circles, though the gentleman present was only a relative of the real culprit. The room filled quickly. Lord Redgate and his daughter were the last to arrive.

Dorothy entered swiftly, eager, animated, dressed as usual, simply but expensively. Her gown was of a soft shade of green that suited her tawny colouring. Lady Lane-Johnson thought she had never seen the girl look better—quite *pretty*, in spite of her strong resemblance to her father, whose irregular features and ruddy complexion she had inherited in a refined and more kindly form. Lord Redgate was an ugly man, but no one could say that his daughter was ugly or even plain.

As Lady Lane-Johnson greeted the pair Philip came forward. He was glad to see Miss Baker again, and Miss Baker made no concealment of her own delight. Her evident pleasure, though it could hardly fail to flatter his vanity, caused Philip a slight feeling of embarrassment. He had never realised that the girl liked him to such an extent; in fact, he remembered that at the time of their parting she had appeared almost indifferent to him. Her heart must have grown fonder with absence.

"Pater," she said, turning to her father, "this is Mr. Flint, who was so kind to me in India, you remember."

Lord Redgate shook hands without speaking. Philip encountered a searching gaze from beneath the shaggy red eyebrows. He felt he was being "sized up."

"You will take Miss Baker down to dinner,"

Grace told her brother, "and you must put up with me, Lord Redgate, though"—with an engaging smile—"I can't talk about labour troubles, and 'back to the land,' or anything of that kind, you know."

He grunted. Certainly Lord Redgate's strong point was not "manners."

"Now we are all here," went on Lady Lane-Johnson, not at all disconcerted—she had expected nothing else from her distinguished guest, peer of the realm with unlimited riches though he was—"except John, of course." Consulting her list, she went in and out among the company allotting partners, while Miss Baker chattered with a sort of nervous excitement to Philip.

"And how is India? It seems more like twenty years to me instead of only two since I was out there. I shall never rest till I can get back. How long are you home for?"

"Six months, unless I take an extension."

"Good! You will come and see us? I've such heaps to talk about; and you must stay with us in the country. Your sister has told me how splendidly you have got on—Simla and Calcutta, and no end of importance. The next thing will be 'The Star,' of coûrse."

Just then Sir John hurried in, and the little disturbance that ensued as he went round shaking hands, to be successfully anchored by his wife to Lady Bawe, parted them for the moment. But when, with Dorothy on his arm, Philip found himself descending the staircase, carefully avoiding the train of the lady in front of them, it was of Stella Crayfield that he

was thinking. Miss Baker had innocently started the aching, regretful memory. The one star he really desired was not for him, would never be his. Where was Stella at this moment? What had become of her? The letter he had written to her after her husband's death was never answered, and, true to his promise, he had "understood," had accepted and respected her silence with bitter resignation, extracting what solace he could from his work and his rapid advancement, though his success brought him little solid satisfaction.

Now they were all seated at the dinner table, with slices of musky melon before them; and fantastically the notion struck him that Miss Baker was rather like a slice of melon herself—all curves and rich golden hues, delectable but just as unsatisfying.

"What about the book?" he inquired with an interest that was not wholly simulated. "If it has appeared, why didn't you send me a copy?"

Her face fell. "Oh, that was a dreadful blow!" She looked up at him with a pathetic demand for sympathy in her fine eyes. "No one would publish the book unless all expenses were guaranteed by the author, and though, of course, there would have been no difficulty about that——"

"You wanted it to come out on its own merits?"

"Yes, that was how I felt. Pater said it was very stupid of me."

"I think it was very honest of you."

"Do you really? I often wanted to ask you, but it seemed such a confession of failure, and you know

you always made me feel a failure when I was with you in India!"

"Did I? I assure you it was quite unintentional."

She laughed a little self-consciously. "Oh, I'm sure it was very good for me, and perhaps it helped me to realise that my object in writing a book at all was not so much to give my experiences and opinions to the public as to impress my friends with my cleverness and superiority. Really *you* are to blame for the non-appearance of the book."

"What an unkind accusation!"

"Not quite so unkind perhaps as it might appear," she said softly; then, as though to edge away from a too intimate topic, she began to ask questions about his last appointment, about his voyage home. What had he done with Jacob? Had he sold the chestnut pony? And they talked and talked as course succeeded course, until the wine and the wonderfully cooked food, and the girl's unaffected interest in himself and his doings chased the cloud from Philip's spirit, lifted his depression, and he felt, as the women streamed from the dining-room at the conclusion of the meal, that perchance life need not be quite so dreary, so empty, after all.

Someone plumped down in the vacant chair beside him. It was Dorothy's parent, a glass of port in his hand, purpose in his bearing. Philip prepared himself for an argument as to the claims of India to Home Rule. He felt ready to go farther than his own convictions in order to confute the ignorant and arrogant assertions he anticipated from this man, who seemed to him a traitor to his own class, and equally

a traitor to the class into which he had shoved himself by means of his tongue and his wealth.

Instead, equally to his annoyance, he found himself being catechised as to his pay and prospects in the Indian service. When would his pension be due? What would it amount to? Did he expect any special recognition for his work during the famine? Philip scowled and answered shortly, said in conclusion that he expected no recognition of his famine services, it was all in the day's work. He endeavoured to change the subject, but his inquisitor, for some reason of his own (if he had any, as Philip queried, beyond vulgar curiosity), was not to be snubbed. "Let me see, what are the Indian decorations? C.I.E.'s one of them?"

Philip interposed flippantly: "Which means A.S.S. very often!" But the pleasantry was lost on Lord Redgate, who either ignored or did not perceive it.

"Now I recollect," he continued. "And C.S.I., the Star of India; but I'm blessed if I know which is the more important."

"The Star, of course," snapped Philip. Why in the world should he be haunted this evening by the word that was so closely associated with all that had gone wrong in his life?

Lord Redgate produced a gold pencil-case and made a note on his shirt cuff. Philip watched him, wondering moodily what he was writing; then Lord Redgate looked up, and the eyes of the two men met.

"You were very good to my girl in India," he said unexpectedly, and the rugged face softened.

Philip flushed, repenting his antagonism, but he could not bring himself to like Lord Redgate any better. "I did nothing," he protested awkwardly.

"She told me how you looked after her. My girl and I understand each other; there are no secrets between us."

"There was very little to tell. I was glad to be of use."

A pause followed, and Philip rose. "If you will excuse me, I want to have a few words with my brother-in-law." And he made his way round the table to where Sir John was sitting silent, not attempting to make conversation. His wife was perhaps right when she declared that John was the worst host in the world; but his wine was excellent if his company was not, and his guests were contented with the former.

Meanwhile in the drawing-room Miss Baker had attached herself to the guileless Lady Flint, who was willingly drawn into confidences respecting her son's boyhood. Here was a nice, unaffected girl; it was no effort to talk to her, especially as she was anxious to talk about Philip, and had seen Philip in India, had seen how he lived and how hard he worked.

"It must be so lovely for you to have him at home again," said this charming young lady.

"Yes, my dear, it is a great comfort and pleasure, but I don't feel quite happy about him. He has changed a good deal."

"Well, it's a long time since you last saw him, isn't it?"

"I don't think he looks well."

"Neither do I, but he will soon be all the better for the change to England."

"He was a delicate child though he grew up quite strong. You see, he was born in India, and I couldn't bring him home till he was nearly seven years old." The old lady prattled on, and Miss Baker listened with such encouraging interest that Lady Flint plunged deep into the subject of Philip's childish ailments, the difficulties over his education, the agonies of parting with him just when she felt he most needed her care.

"We Indian mothers have always that trial to meet—separation from either husband or children, and it never seems to be taken into account by those at home who don't have to face it. Personally we were lucky in finding a nice place for Philip and Grace till they were old enough to go to school, but then the holidays were always on my mind; relations are sometimes so injudicious. Fortunately the children had character, both of them, and as my husband rose in the service I was able to come home more frequently to see them. Dear Philip was such a clever boy!"

"He is a very clever man!" quoth Miss Baker emphatically, "and how well he has got on!"

"He was always ambitious; he mapped out his own career from the very first—got a scholarship for his public school and again at Oxford, and passed very high for the Civil Service. He could have stayed at home, but he preferred to take India, and his father and I were very glad. Life in an office would not have suited him; he was a sportsman at heart as well as a student."

"No wonder you are proud of him——"

Lady Flint dropped her fan; Miss Baker picked it up, deferentially, and as she restored it Lady Flint thought the girl's hair very pretty, though it was a pity, in her opinion, that she wore it cut short. A possibility crept into her mind that was not altogether distasteful: was there likely to be "anything" between Miss Baker and her beloved son? Though Miss Baker had no connection with India beyond her brief visit to the country, she seemed a warm-hearted, sensible child, and certainly she appreciated Philip! Lady Flint was aware that Lord Redgate was a very rich man, which might be a barrier; if not of course it would be nice to feel that Philip and his wife need never be worried over money matters; in the case of Grace's marriage that had been a satisfactory element, who could deny it?—though she would not have had either of her children influenced in the least degree by worldly advantages.

She felt her way gently. "How would you like to live in India?" she inquired, and she saw the girl flush as she answered decidedly: "I should simply love it!"

"Perhaps your father will take you there again for a visit some day?"

"I went alone, you know—that time. And if I ever go again it will not be on a visit; I shall go to stay."

Lady Flint looked a little puzzled. "But what would your father say to that?"

"My father never interferes with anything I want to do."

"Dear me!" said Lady Flint.

The door opened and the men came into the room. Philip made straight for his mother and Miss Baker, who whispered hurriedly: "Lady Flint, may I come and see you?"

"Do, my dear, I am always at home on Sundays. I shall be very pleased to see you. Come next Sunday if you can." And she made a mental note to keep Philip at home next Sunday afternoon. If the two young people were mutually attracted she would help on the courtship to the best of her powers; but she rather wished Miss Baker were not a rich man's daughter, and not an Honourable—it would mean that Philip, like Grace, might be absorbed into a world she did not understand.

"I have been hearing all about you!" exclaimed Dorothy, looking up at Philip as he stood beside them. "How tiresome and naughty you were, and how you wouldn't work, and gave such a lot of trouble after you grew up!"

They all laughed, and Philip glanced affectionately at his mother, a glance that endeared him the more to the long-limbed girl in the green gown. . . .

Then a well-known pianist who was of the party consented to play, and silence was enforced on the audience. Once at the piano the musician continued to give unlimited samples of his own compositions, and Philip, though he thought the fellow made an unconscionable noise, welcomed the respite from conversation. Again he felt depressed, inert, unreasonably impatient with the well-fed, well-dressed throng that had met together merely to eat and drink

and to impress each other with their own importance. They were all so self-satisfied in their several ways! He made up his mind that he would get away from London as soon as he could do so without hurting his parents' feelings; go somewhere to fish by himself; he had no use for crowds like this.

"You will come and see us?" repeated Miss Baker when at last farewells became general. "Come and dine quite quietly, just ourselves. When will you come?"

He could hardly plead a press of engagements, yet he was seized with the reluctance to tie himself that so often attacks the newly returned Anglo-Indian; everyone was in such a hurry at home, he wanted to feel free, but evasion was impossible, and a near date was decided upon.

Going home with his father and mother in the hired brougham he said: "I wonder how Grace can stick that kind of life!"

"So do I," agreed the General.

"But her friends are all so clever," protested Lady Flint; she had never before felt so well disposed towards Grace's world; "and most of them do something."

"Nothing that really matters, except the doctor lot," growled Sir Philip, puffing at one of his son-in-law's excellent cigars. "Upon my word, I felt thankful I was a bit deaf when that music master, or whatever he calls himself, began hammering on the piano. And as for that fellow Redgate—all I can say is that if he made himself, as he boasts, he made a mistake."

"Well, dear, his daughter seems a very nice girl. You think she is nice, don't you, Philip?"

Philip answered casually: "Oh, she's all right, as long as she gets her own way."

Lady Flint ventured to announce that Miss Baker was probably coming to tea on Sunday, and Sir Philip said he hoped her father was not coming too. "If he is," he added truculently, "I shall go out."

How tiresome they both were, thought poor Lady Flint; perhaps the dinner had something to do with it, certainly it had been very rich, and far too much of it. The General was sure to have eaten all the things that he knew disagreed with him, and of course Philip was not accustomed to such elaborate feasts.

CHAPTER X

PHILIP did not carry out his intention of leaving London as soon as escape could be accomplished without hurt to his parents' feelings. He felt as though helpless in the grip of some mysterious conspiracy that from day to day left him with hardly an hour that he could call his own.

"London is an awful place," he complained to his mother; "the smallest errand runs away with the best part of a day, buying socks and shirts for example, not to speak of boots and the tailor! Trades-people seem to take a delight in obstructing one at every turn. If you wish to buy a pair of gloves in comfort you have to be prepared to spend hours over it, what with going and coming and hunting about for what you really want!"

"Dearest boy, how you do exaggerate!" argued Lady Flint, fondly. "But I know what you mean. I always felt the same for the first month after I got home from India. Life is so different out there; plenty of space and no trouble over trifles, though one hardly calls setting oneself up in necessaries exactly a trifle anywhere. You ought to go to the dentist, too, and see a doctor, and have your eyes tested. Don't leave all that to the end of your leave, or the last month will be worse than the first. And your father thinks you ought to attend a levee."

"My teeth are all right, I'm not ill, and I can

see perfectly well; also I am not going to attend a levee," he assured her firmly; he could not have explained his condition of mind to his mother even had he desired to do so; he could hardly account for it to himself. He felt restless and listless at the same time; he hated the crowds in the streets and the shops, the appointments to see relations that his mother cajoled him into making, the little luncheons and teas with aunts and cousins who were all so much more delighted to see him than he was to see them; and Grace was a nuisance; she dragged him hither and thither, tied him down to engagements without his permission, told him, when he protested, that he wanted "waking up." Miss Baker, to his surprise, was ever ready to aid and abet Grace in making up theatre and supper parties—always something—Sandown, Ranelagh, the Park, endless "tamashas"; Miss Baker appeared to have forgotten all her unworldly theories, and to be as keen on gaiety as the rest of them; and wherever they went he found himself at her side. Philip began to suspect his sister of match-making; the suspicion became a certainty one evening when he had accompanied her unwillingly to a great "crush" in Carlton House Terrace, which, to him, was just a kaleidoscope of colour and jewels, and a pushing, chattering throng.

The blaze of light, the crowd, and the scents, and the closeness of the atmosphere, despite blocks of ice and electric fans, confused and depressed him; he stood moody and resentful as Grace greeted her friends, kept introducing him: "My brother from India," and he had to listen and reply to vapid

remarks about heat and snakes, and how interesting it must be to live in India, and so on; till at length, in desperation, he interrupted a conversation his sister was holding with a being whose coat-front was bespattered with orders, to tell her he meant to go home.

"This is more than I can stand," he said with suppressed impatience; "I'm off!"

"Oh, Philip, do wait; Dorothy is sure to be here presently, and then you'll be all right." Her eyes roved round the brilliant scene. "She was to meet us here, you know. You can't disappoint her."

"She won't be disappointed."

"Of course she will be. Philip," she added, with serious intention, "don't be a fool!"

"What do you mean?" he began hotly, but just then they were swept asunder by new arrivals, and as he turned to flee he encountered Miss Baker at the head of the stairs. He felt that a web was being woven around him; now he understood what they were all driving at—Grace, and his mother, and yes, Dorothy herself!—for as he met her eyes shining with welcome he realised that she, with everyone else, awaited but one outcome of their friendship. How blind he had been; he cursed his own denseness.

As a matter of course she attached herself to him. "Where shall we go? It's too early for supper, and I don't feel inclined to sit and listen to music. Let's find some comfortable corner where we can talk in peace."

"I am making for a comfortable corner farther away," he said petulantly; "I'm going home!"

"Oh!" her dismay was patent, "and when I've only just come? I've got something to tell you, something thrilling! Look here, I know this house well. Come along, follow me!"

What else could he do? Morosely he followed her, feeling rather as if he were walking in his sleep, through a door, along a passage, up a few steps, and they were alone in a pretty boudoir that was cool and quiet, fragrant with flowers, away from the crowd and the noise.

"Now we are safe! Give me a cigarette." Dorothy settled herself in a deep chair; the gleam of her hair against a pile of purple cushions, her long white arms and slender outline presented a striking picture, as Philip could not but note as he stood before her on the hearthrug. Had it not been for the disturbing idea that had taken definite shape in his mind this evening he would have felt soothed, contented, very much at home with her. As it was, he began to distrust his own powers of resistance. Either he must get out of London at once, or he would be forced seriously to consider the question of asking Lord Redgate's daughter to be his wife. If, as he could not help assuming, she expected him to propose to her sooner or later, opposition from her father was not to be anticipated. Dorothy would have her own way—given the chance. The fact that he was now actually contemplating the possibility startled him. What a mean brute he must be! He could never love the girl as a man should love the woman he married; if it

became necessary he must tell her the truth, and put an end to all thought of anything but friendship. . . .

"You are very glum to-night," she remarked, gazing at him through a cloud of smoke. "What is the matter?"

"Probably the usual curse of the Anglo-Indian—liver!" he replied, with an effort to speak lightly. "I've been eating and drinking too much ever since I got home. It's time I went in for the simple life, somewhere out of all this. It doesn't suit my peculiar constitution!"

"It doesn't suit me either," she said reflectively.

"You seem to thrive on it, anyway!"

"Oh! I am one of those chameleon people who can adapt themselves to any surroundings. I could be happy anywhere, on a desert island, in the Indian jungle—more particularly in the Indian jungle, provided——"

She paused and flicked some cigarette ash on to the carpet.

He took a little china saucer from the mantelpiece and placed it on a table beside her. "You must learn to be tidy wherever you are!" he said with mock severity, and added: "What was it you had to tell me?"

"A secret! Such a nice one, though soon it will be a secret no longer."

"Oh! Are you going to be married in spite of your contempt for my sex?"

She drew in her breath sharply, as though something had hurt her. "Why do you remind me of my

silly ideas? Don't you think I have the sense to see when I have been wrong?"

He evaded reply to the question. "Well, out with this wonderful secret. Don't keep me in suspense."

"It's this—you are to have the C.S.I.!" she told him triumphantly. "The Star of India! Doesn't it sound splendid—glittering, glorious, grand!"

He stared at her stupidly, stammered: "How—how do you know?"

"Pater told me to-night, just as I was starting to come here," and she added naïvely: "to come and meet *you*. Good old Pater, he is arranging it all. Now, what do you say to that for a piece of news?"

"It is extremely kind of him, but I don't want it, I don't deserve it!" he cried in desperation. "You must tell him—it must be stopped——"

"What on earth are you talking about? If you don't deserve it, who does? Anyway, it's to be yours, whether you feel you deserve it or not, and I can't tell you how proud I feel that in a kind of way you will have got it through *me!*"

Through her! and through her, if he chose to say the word, he could have all that, to the world, would appear to make life well worth the living. For the moment the temptation was strong, almost overwhelming. Here, for the asking, was the devotion of a clever, capable girl who had the makings of a true comrade, who would revive his ambitions, enter wholeheartedly into his career; he saw himself honoured,

successful, beyond his dreams; a power in the country that he loved to serve, with every advantage, officially and socially, in his grasp. Why should he hesitate? Here was his chance! he stood at the turning-point of his existence that meant "fortune" without struggle or delay if he went boldly forward. . . .

Then, all at once, sweeping aside the temptation, the brilliant outlook, came the thought of Stella, the true Star of his life and his heart; and dimly he felt that to barter the memory of that other star, however far from his reach, for tangible gain would be infamous, contemptible. The shadow was more to him than the substance; he could not do this thing and feel that his purpose was clean!

"I suppose you will think I am mad," he said slowly, with difficulty, "but there is something—something that stands in the way——"

The girl paled, dropped the end of her cigarette into the saucer, and he saw her hands grip the arms of the chair. "Is it—is it because——" she lost her self-control. "Oh! don't look at me like that! Can't you see—what does anything matter! Don't be so proud. Nothing can be too good for you—Philip!"

She rose, held her hands out to him, firm, square hands; he took them gently, reverently, and she swayed as she recognised the lack of passion in his touch.

Haltingly, as best he could, he tried to tell her the truth, but it all sounded so elusive, so unsubstantial, he felt he could hardly expect her to comprehend.

Silence fell between them; he turned from her in painful regret.

She laid her hand on his shoulder. "Philip, don't you trust me? Do you think I can't know how you feel? If I can't help you in one way I can in another perhaps, by giving you all my sympathy and understanding. I hope if I had been placed as you are that I should have done exactly the same. I see—I realise——" she faltered pitifully, "that as things are you can't take the Star, you can't owe it to *me* in the least degree. I will explain somehow to my father; leave it to me, it isn't too late, and some day you will have it—earn it yourself entirely—and—it may be the other one too, I hope so, I do indeed! if she is worthy of you. But oh! how could she, how could she leave your letter unanswered! There may have been some mistake, it may come all right, don't give up hope. The most wonderful things happen. And I—I shall always be your friend——"

She stopped, breathing fast; she had spoken so rapidly, under such stress of emotion. As he met her strained, wide-open eyes she looked almost unreal. A mist clouded his vision; he felt choked as he tried to answer, to thank her; speech seemed so futile; for him the whole thing was beyond words; he knew he was failing hopelessly to express himself.

She gave a tremulous laugh that was half a sob. "It's all right, don't say anything, don't try. We both *know*. Let's get back to the crowd," and moving to the door she turned out the lights. Quickly she

went before him, down the steps and along the narrow passage. He saw her mingle with the throng, her head held high, talking and laughing, a bright, conspicuous figure, a brave, noble-hearted girl! He wished honestly that he could have loved her; wished it quite apart from the solid advantages she could have brought him as his wife.

CHAPTER XI

A DAY or two later when Philip, preparatory to his departure from London, was choosing a fishing-rod in a well-known shop devoted to the requirements of anglers, a little lady dressed in the height of fashion rustled over to him from the farther end of the show-room where she had been standing in company with an elderly, distinguished-looking man.

"Is it Mr. Flint?" she inquired gaily; and as he looked at her in puzzled politeness a vague memory returned to him of someone trigged out in sequins and tinsel, with a tambourine. . . .

"You don't remember me? This time I'm not pretending. We really have met before! My name is Matthews—Maud Verrall, you know, Stella Crayfield's friend. How history repeats itself. Fancy my having to introduce myself again, and all among fishing-rods and tackle and things, instead of in a ball-room full of dressed-up idiots in India!"

"Why, of course—of course, how are you?" he said, gathering his wits together, battling with an impulse to attack her on the spot as to Stella's whereabouts, to ask her all about her. If anyone knew it would be this wonderfully garbed little person, who now proceeded to beckon to her deserted companion.

"Here's another old friend of Stella's, Sir George Rolt; you saw him at that horrible ball, if you remember——"

The shop assistant stood by in patient resentment as the male customers neglected their object, and the lady chattered of everything but fishing-rods.

"I'm taking Sir George down with me to my old home in the country to-morrow for a visit," she told Mr. Flint; "he and my husband are going to fish from morning till night. So dull for me! but I shall have Stella to talk to, and she will be thankful. She's at The Chestnuts, you know. 'Grandmamma and the Aunts'," she added with a mischievous "moue," then she sighed "Poor Stella!" and she looked at him searchingly. "That was a terrible business, wasn't it?"

Philip composed himself with an effort. "Her husband's death, you mean? Yes, I suppose it was. I have heard nothing of her since it happened. I hope she is well, have you seen her lately?"

"Quite lately; I've only been in town for a flying visit, just to get clothes."

There was an awkward pause. Philip became aware that Sir George was regarding him with particular attention. Was the man Stella's future husband? The possibility filled him with helpless rage.

Mrs. Matthews coughed artificially and glanced from one man to the other. "Sir George, dear," she said sweetly, "you'd better go back to that kind gentleman who was giving you such good advice about fishing-rods, or someone else will snap him up. I want to talk secrets with Mr. Flint, if he's not in too great a hurry."

Sir George smiled and moved away compliantly. Mrs. Matthews apologised to Philip's assistant. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I haven't seen this friend of mine for such ages. Presently he will buy *heaps* of things, don't wait for him now if you are busy. I will see that he doesn't run away!"

The young man succumbed to her blandishments, and Mrs. Matthews piloted Philip to a corner of the shop where she annexed a couple of chairs.

"This is a funny place for a private conversation!" she remarked, "but I'm not going to lose such a chance now I've got it. Fancy our meeting like this; what a piece of luck! Now listen to me and answer my questions." She scrutinised him closely. "You look struck all of a heap!"

"I feel it," said Philip briefly.

"Why? because you want to hear news of Stella, or because you don't?"

"Because it's the one thing in the world I wish for," he answered, his heart beating fast.

Her face cleared. "That's all right; one step forward! Now tell me—do you know why Stella never answered your letter?"

"There could be only one reason. I told her in my letter that if I did not hear from her I should understand." He fixed his eyes on a stuffed salmon in a glass case, he could not bring himself to meet Mrs. Matthews' inquisitive gaze.

"You silly fool!" said Stella's friend vigorously. "Couldn't you have guessed that she must have had some desperate reason?"

"I thought——"

"You thought everything that was wrong, of course. Men always do. Sir George Rolt thinks he is devoted to me at present, dear old thing, and that I am equally 'gone' on him, but he's mistaken, though it's great fun for us both while it lasts. Can you stand a shock, Mr. Philip Flint?"

"I can stand anything," said Philip doggedly, "except——"

"I know what you were going to say—except to hear that Stella never wants to see you again?"

"Exactly."

"Would it make any difference if you found her altered in another way?"

"How do you mean?" he asked, mystified.

Then Mrs. Matthews 'set to' as she would herself have expressed it, and for the space of five minutes she talked breathlessly, uninterrupted by Philip, who listened to her in greedy silence.

"There," she concluded at last. "Now, do you see?"

"Not altogether, I must confess. I don't see why Stella should have concluded that her appearance would have made the smallest difference to me, after my letter. It was very unfair to me!"

"Don't talk such trash. It was perfectly natural. She was too hideous for words until she got home; we came home together, and I made her put herself into the hands of an expert. Massage and treatment did wonders, but, all the same, poor dear, she will never be beautiful again!"

"Good heavens, as if that would matter to me. Whatever she looks like——" he paused, overcome by his feelings.

"Well, I will believe you, though one never knows! Anyway she's not so bad, it's only one side of her face."

"Mrs. Matthews, for goodness' sake don't talk like this; I can't bear it. Just tell me, once for all—does Stella care for me still?"

"Yes, darling, she does; and the best thing you can do is to come down with me and Sir George to-morrow, fishing-rods and all, to The Court, and make her tell you so herself. Will you?"

"Will I?" he scoffed ecstatically. "Mrs. Matthews, you are an angel!"

"Not yet," she assured him. "I don't mean to die young."

* * * * * *

Philip Flint walked up the short drive to The Chestnuts. The air was filled with the peace and the scent of the summer's evening; and as he viewed the old house with its little paved terrace, the lawn sloping down to the stream, the cedar tree, the red wall of the kitchen garden, he felt that it was all familiar to him.

An old lady was seated on the terrace flags—that would be "Grandmamma"; and an austere-looking female emerged from one of the French windows to speak to the old lady—was that Aunt Augusta, or Aunt Ellen? His heart warmed towards them. And as he hesitated, hardly daring to go

forward, he caught sight of a form stretched on a long chair beneath the cedar tree.

Boldly he took a short cut through the shrubs. At the sound of his footsteps she looked up, gave a little cry, hid her dear, maimed face in her hands. Stella—his beloved, his star, his Star of India!

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